



## Prosocial I-O Psychology: Having an Impact Beyond Traditional Research and Practice

The field of I-O psychology may not be first on the list when we think of helping professions, but research suggests that when we are connected to the outcome of our work and understand its impact on the well-being of others, we are more motivated and perform better at work. In fact, SIOP has become increasingly interested in promoting the research and application of I-O psychology principles to contexts and issues outside the traditional organizational setting. Prosocial I-O psychology is defined as “the application of Industrial and Organizational (I-O) psychology for the purpose of improving societal well-being” (SIOP website, 2015). The study of prosocial I-O psychology extends our research to not only employee well-being outcomes, but to the well-being of society as a whole. This growing area of I-O psychology involves research in both the nonprofit sector (e. g., focusing on the retention of nonprofit volunteers) and the for-profit sector (e. g., focusing on corporate social responsibility). At Portland State University, a variety of I-O psychology research focuses on the health and well-being of employees from a variety of understudied populations and professions, ranging from construction workers to correctional officers to veterans. The following provides a brief summary of some of the areas within which I-O psychology has contributed to prosocial issues, including specific projects here at Portland State University (PSU). We also discuss several ways students and others can get involved.



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### Applying I-O Psychology to Prosocial Issues

In a recent commentary in the book *Using Industrial-Organizational Psychology for the Greater Good* (2013), Douglas Reynolds recalled his experience attending a SIOP session focused on humanitarian work psychology. He stated, “something important was being discovered that ha[d] been in front of us all along” (p. 572). Indeed, in the few years since there has been tremendous energy and effort devoted to addressing issues important to our society. However, even in the early

2000s, a few organizational psychologists already saw the value of applying I-O psychology principles and practices to address environmental, societal, and global issues (e.g., Galindo-Kuhn & Guzley, 2001; Hutchings, 2002). By the late 2000s and into the next decade, I-O psychologists were enthusiastically mobilizing their resources in the form of task forces (e.g., Global Task Force on Organisational Psychology for Poverty Reduction, 2008), organized academic research (e.g., Musa, & Hamid, 2008), and on-the-ground work within and outside the U.S. (e.g., Foster, McWha, & Gloss, 2013). In a recent commentary in *Industrial and Organizational Psychology*, Rupp and colleagues acknowledged a shift in the field toward a concerted focus on the “greater good” by stating, “What might have in the past been considered on the periphery of I-O psychology is now the mainstream” (Rupp, Skarlicki, & Shao, 2013, p. 361). Following the schema utilized by Olson-Buchanan, Koppes Bryan, and Foster Thompson (2013) in their recent book, the following provides a summary of three areas within which I-O psychologists have been active in addressing issues important to our society, environment, and the human experience.

### ***Supporting Corporate Responsibility***

A major way in which I-O psychologists have been actively applying their knowledge and skills to help the greater good is through corporate social responsibility (CSR) efforts. CSR-related activities can refer to both internal and external endeavors. Internal CSR-related activities can include promoting diversity and inclusion,

actively supporting employee health and wellness, and developing corporate philanthropy and volunteer programs (Olson-Buchanan et al., 2013). Diversity and inclusion efforts can include ensuring that organizations actively recruit from diverse sources and that employees of various demographic groups (e.g., gender, age, race) are given equal access to advancement opportunities. Employee health and wellness efforts may involve improving the physical work environment (such as improved ergonomics) or intervening to decrease employee stress. Development of corporate philanthropy and volunteer programs refers to allotting organizational resources (e.g., money, time) to make a positive societal impact. Externally, CSR efforts refer to balancing the organization’s goals with its impact on other countries, people, and the environment. It refers to an organization holding itself accountable for its actions and striving, through ethical and moral actions, to have a positive impact on society.

### ***Applying I-O Practices to Volunteer Management and Nonprofit-Based Organizations***

A second major area in which I-O psychologists have a prosocial impact is by working with nonprofit organizations and volunteer groups. Just as I-O professionals are needed in the corporate world to manage the recruitment, retention, and motivation of employees, so too are they needed in the nonprofit sector. For example, just as in the corporate world, I-O psychologists can help retain nonprofit volunteers by providing realistic job previews and imple-

menting effective socialization programs (Lopina & Rogelberg, 2013). Retaining effective and committed volunteers is invaluable to many nonprofits because they often rely on volunteers to execute their programs and activities.

Virtually every I-O psychology area (selection, performance management, training, etc.) that helps improve the functioning of businesses in the corporate world is also needed in the nonprofit sector. In fact, nonprofit organizations (at least those that are the most effective) are run similarly to for-profit companies. The main difference is that in the case of nonprofits the end goal is not usually to sell a product for profit but, instead, to provide a service. Those services can vary greatly, but they often aim to improve society in some way—for example, helping to reintegrate veterans into civilian life, offering educational after-school programs to underprivileged children, or raising funds and awareness to cure a debilitating disease.

There are also some unique challenges—and associated opportunities—related to nonprofit work. Because pay in the nonprofit sector is often lower than in the for-profit sector, recruiting and maintaining top talent require particularly thoughtful strategies. Relatedly, it is important that managers understand and implement means of motivating employees aside from those that are financial in nature. Further, many employees in nonprofit organizations occupy multiple roles, increasing the risk of role ambiguity and role conflict. By utilizing our I-O psychology knowledge and skills to address these issues and help non-

profit organizations run more efficiently, we can directly improve nonprofits' ability to achieve their missions, thus helping the greater good.

### ***Taking I-O Psychology Abroad***

Another emerging area that has immense promise for making an impact is the application of I-O psychology practices to issues of poverty, equality, and humanitarian struggles in developing countries. Berry and colleagues (2011) argued that I-O psychologists are uniquely equipped to provide assistance on a number of fronts related to poverty reduction, including the development of policy and mandates as well as the implementation and evaluation of programs in the field. Others have argued that I-O psychologists should have a role in helping to facilitate the success of microfinance initiatives and programs aimed at building entrepreneurship abroad (Gielnik & Frese, 2013), which has also been expanded to directly understand and address implications for female entrepreneurs (Akpalu, Alnaa, & Aglobitse, 2012). Together, researchers and practitioners have demonstrated the myriad ways that I-O psychology can be creatively applied to address issues that extend well beyond the traditional boundaries, both conceptual and physical.

### **Getting Involved**

Opportunities to get involved in prosocial I-O psychology can take on many different forms. Depending on which areas you feel most drawn to, involvement can include everything from volunteering through professional organizations, to researching

topics meant to improve the workplace for all types of employees (like veterans), to participating in or starting new policies and programs at existing organizations.

### ***Opportunities in Professional Organizations***

There are many helpful resources to get involved in prosocial I-O initiatives and opportunities. SIOP maintains a list of prosocial programs on the website ([www.siop.org/prosocial/](http://www.siop.org/prosocial/)), and new programs conducted by SIOP members can be submitted for inclusion at any time. If you know of prosocial I-O psychology programs or volunteer opportunities, sharing information through the SIOP website can help build collective support for initiatives and assist in recruiting volunteers. Current programs listed include (a) the Veteran Transition Project, which seeks to reduce veteran unemployment through application of I-O psychology expertise in areas like coaching, culture integration, and translation of military skills into the civilian workforce; (b) the Global Organisation of Humanitarian Work Psychology, which consists of members devoted to humanitarian efforts through practice and study of I-O psychology (see [www.gohwp.org](http://www.gohwp.org) for membership details); and (c) Project INCUBATE, which is a project devoted to collecting and widely distributing ideas for research on poverty reduction. Although financial support of prosocial I-O psychology goals is also beneficial, direct participation in these and other occupation-based volunteering opportunities helps meet the need for contributions of professional skills (Rizzuto & Vandaveer, 2013).

### ***Opportunities in Research***

Other opportunities to get involved may include both research and practical applications. Indeed, these opportunities may even come from your own department, college, or university. For example, at Portland State University, ongoing research projects such as the Study for Employment Retention of Veterans (SERVe) allow faculty and students to collaborate on efforts to improve societal well-being. SERVe is a project focused on transforming the workplace to better support health, well-being, and reintegration-related experiences of veterans and their families. Specifically, SERVe is designed to develop and test a supervisor training intervention to improve support for veterans' needs in the workplace. **Dr. Leslie Hammer**, the lead investigator of SERVe, says, "I became involved in prosocial research because I had a deep interest in understanding how the workplace could help to improve the health and well-being of workers and their families. We want to have the broadest impact we can have. We have expertise that extends so far and can have such broad applied value. Back in 2010 to 2011, I was seeing military service members returning home, and the U.S. president was implementing policies regarding hiring veterans. I was concerned that the workplace wasn't prepared to support veterans, and I saw an opportunity to directly apply my expertise in training supervisors. I feel we have a responsibility to support our service members, and this is a chance for us to help make that broad impact." By creatively applying our own research interests to benefit societal well-being, we too can further support the growth of prosocial I-O psychology.

## ***Opportunities in Practice***

Within organizations, there are additional opportunities to work toward prosocial goals, including environmental sustainability initiatives, volunteering opportunities, and contributing to other CSR efforts. Many companies offer support for employees' volunteer efforts through corporate volunteer programs, ranging from informal support to direct provision of paid time off for volunteering individually or collectively during work hours (Henning & Jones, 2013). Other companies may be able to build environmental interest teams, and I-O psychologists can contribute through support of policies and practices such as telecommuting, environmentally conscious recruiting, selection and training strategies, and motivating workers to support sustainability goals (Campbell, Provolt, & Campbell, 2013). By calling for, implementing, and utilizing these programs in organizations, I-O psychologists can help meet prosocial goals both internally, within existing companies, and externally, through broader societal change.

### **Conclusion**

An expanding field, prosocial I-O psychology allows us to apply our knowledge of I-O psychology to contexts, such as nonprofit organizations, and issues, such as the struggles of poverty in developing countries, where traditional I-O psychology has not been applied. The application of I-O psychology research and principles to novel contexts and issues allows us to have a far greater impact than ever before. For those interested in getting involved, there

are several professional organizations that can help facilitate this participation. For research experience in this area, you may not have to look further than your department, college, or university. By shifting our focus to such issues, we are able to not only impact the well-being of individuals and organizations but also the well-being of society as a whole.

### **Close to PSU's TIP-TOPics**

On behalf of our team of graduate students at Portland State University, we want to say thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the development and education of our fellow graduate students and readers of our column. We hope the information contained in our columns has been helpful and has inspired our readers to get involved in making our field of I-O psychology more visible and impactful. We offer our best wishes to the next team of students and look forward to continuing to learn and grow from their unique perspectives and advice.

To correspond with the authors about this topic, please e-mail [portlandstatetiptopics@pdx.edu](mailto:portlandstatetiptopics@pdx.edu). Also, to learn more about the graduate students at Portland State University as well as the writers of our column, you may view our graduate student website at <http://www.pdx.edu/psy/graduate-students>.

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# ANNOUNCING



## TIP-TOPics Call for Graduate Student Columnist(s)

TIP-TOPics is a graduate student editorial column published in *The Industrial-Organizational Psychologist (TIP)* on a quarterly basis. The column provides information and advice relevant to SIOP's student membership and has historically been very popular.

The editorial columnist(s) can be an individual or group, and the groups may be made up of students from the same school or different schools; however, you must be current Student Affiliates of SIOP in good standing.

The TIPTOPics columnist(s) will have a 2-year tenure beginning with the October 2015 issue and ending with the July 2017 issue. Columnists must be graduate students throughout this time period, thus all prospective columnists should be at

least 2 years from graduation. Columns are approximately 2,000 words, due four times a year (August 15, November 15, February 15, and May 15), and written according to APA guidelines.

### Submission Information

Statement of interest and one letter of recommendation (from a faculty member who is familiar with the work of the potential columnist/s) should be sent via e-mail to **Morrie Mullins** ([mullins@xavier.edu](mailto:mullins@xavier.edu)) by July 10, 2015. The statement of interest should at a minimum address the following: (a) all potential columnist names and school affiliation and (b) how you will approach the content, style, and structure of the column, including a few potential column topics.

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