

Ethical, Legal, Diversity, and International Issues¹²

The field of industrial-organizational (I/O) psychology focuses on the application of psychological principles in the workplace. Aspects of work studied by I/O psychologists include selection and placement, training and development, compensation, performance appraisal, organization development, quality of worklife, and ergonomics (Muchinsky, 2001).

I/O psychologists face many of the same ethical issues that practitioners and researchers in other subfields of psychology do, including respect for human research participants, confidentiality, and application of research findings to practice. As noted by the American Psychological Association (APA), all psychologists need to be mindful that people are “multicultural beings” and individuals’ life experiences are shaped by one’s cultural perspectives.

However, there are also ethical, legal, and diversity issues unique to the practice of I/O psychology, in part because the application of I/O research affects individuals’ employment, and thus their livelihood. I/O psychologists follow the current APA Ethics Code (APA, 2002) which lays out ten standards addressing issues of competence, human relations, public statements, record keeping, education and training, therapy, ethics, privacy and confidentiality, research and publication, and assessment (APA, 2002).

Organizational practices—in addition to being effective—must be fair, legally defensible, and applied appropriately to hiring, training, promotion, compensation, and related decisions. Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, United States federal legislation, protects groups defined by race, color, religion, sex, and national origin from discrimination. Similarly, Title I of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 bans discrimination on the basis of disability. I/O psychologists work to ensure that organizational processes and tools are fair, job-relevant, and applied appropriately. Underlying much of I/O psychologists’ work is a need for sensitivity and understanding of diversity and international issues, including the impact of culture and ethnic and racial identity on interactions in the workplace. Periodic assessment of organizational activities provides an important structure to review processes for consistent application and fairness at the aggregate level, so organizational actions also must include careful record-keeping. In all contexts, I/O psychologists must prevent the misuse or misinterpretation of their work.

I/O psychologists often collect information through surveys of members of an organization. Sometimes, information revealed in individual responses to organizational surveys surfaces ethical, legal, or professional concerns. For example, a respondent to a job satisfaction survey might describe an instance of sexual harassment or indicate plans to harm him- or herself or others. The commitment to maintain confidentiality can conflict with the commitment to prevent harm. One proactive approach is to compose survey instructions to indicate exceptions to confidentiality such as harm to the respondent or others.

Practitioners must limit their work to areas in which they are competent, in that they possess the appropriate education, training, and experience (APA, 2010). For example, I/O psychology training does not prepare individuals to provide psychotherapy or diagnose and treat mental disorders. In addition, I/O psychologists must avoid conflicts of interest or conflicts of commitments such as those stemming from

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competing obligations. For example, a researcher may balance research transparency, participant privacy, scientific knowledge, and the goals of a research sponsor. When conflicts cannot be avoided, they may be addressed by disclosing the nature of one's potentially conflicting roles, interests, or commitments.

In addition to focusing on the well-being of individuals, I/O psychologists are concerned with human rights and working conditions worldwide. SIOP consults with the United Nations on international economic and social issues. The group has also joined the UN Global Compact, which is an initiative focused on human rights, labor, and other topics.

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