

Local I-O Groups: Blacks in I/O

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They say timing is everything, and that sometimes someone comes along just when you need them most. This month the SIOP Local I-O Group Relations Committee highlights *Blacks in I/O*, a recently founded local group that is making a timely national impact.



As I-O psychologists, we seek to improve the workplace experiences for all by promoting inclusivity, voice, and fairness. Yet only 4% of SIOP's members identify as "Black/African American" according to a membership survey conducted in 2018. Similarly, only 3% of respondents to the [2019 post-annual conference survey](#) self-reported as "African, African-American." This vast underrepresentation struck **Macy Cheeks** and Shavonne Holman while attending their first SIOP conference in 2015 and across the next 4 years where little seemed to change.

As a result, Cheeks and Holman decided it was time to act. Following the 2019 SIOP Conference near Washington, DC, they formed *Blacks in I/O*, first as a LinkedIn networking group, then as a local I-O group in the greater Washington, DC area, and now as an organization with a national footprint and ambitious goals.

"*Blacks in I/O* psychology is an organization committed to changing what the I-O industry looks like ... in building a pipeline and [creating] opportunities for Black and African American professionals to break into the industry," Holman recently told **Ben Butina** on the September 30, 2020 episode of his Department 12 podcast. "We just reached over 1,000 followers on Instagram [[@blacksinio](#)] ... We are just so honored and appreciative of all the love and support that we've gotten over the past year. We're just grateful, and we're open and welcoming to anyone who wants to help us achieve our goals."

So, what exactly is *Blacks in I/O*, why does it exist, and how can you get involved? First, it's important to understand their backstory.

Founders' Story

Holman and Cheeks attended Howard University together, a prestigious historically black university, where both were psychology majors yet neither even heard about I-O during their undergrad journey. Though they parted ways after graduation, they both independently determined that their respective career paths were not matching their passions in life and sought out new direction. By happenstance each stumbled upon I-O, felt a pull to the field, and pursued and completed a master's degree. Awesome, right!? Well, yes and no.

During grad school, Cheeks and Holman both encountered experiences that gave them pause. For example, in class they felt social pressure to act and talk a certain way so that their peers and professors would treat them the same as everyone else. They felt the need to answer questions in the "right" way to be perceived as equally intelligent as their non-Black counterparts. Though they went to a noteworthy undergraduate university, they didn't feel as knowledgeable as their white counterparts, many of whom already possessed foundational knowledge of the field from their intro-to-I-O courses or some other form of exposure. "I felt like I was at a disadvantage in my graduate program," says Holman. "I went to Howard University, you know a great university ... Why is it that I didn't feel as equipped and prepared in this program as my other classmates?"

Cheeks describes a specific experience with a committee member while proposing her master's thesis who asked her to remove one small section on the history of White privilege because "it was not proven, it was not scientific, and there was nothing to back up that it was a true phenomenon," she recalls. "And I was shocked. I think that's why it's important that there are Black people, or people who understand the nuances of diversity to be in these spaces. Whether it's as students or as professors, just making sure that the experiences that Black folks go through on a day-to-day are acknowledged in our curriculum and in the teachings of I-O."

With these events already shaping their experience within the field of I-O, they headed to the 2015 Annual SIOP Conference where they noticed that they were among the very few Black people there. They had virtually the same conversation at the 2019 SIOP Conference, so they decided to do something about it, giving birth to what has now become *Blacks in I/O*.

Initially they just sought to bring together all the Black people in the field through a LinkedIn group. They invited everyone they could think of, they scanned SIOP's social-media user list, and they tried to be as resourceful as possible. However, that quickly grew into a "local group" that began meeting every other month in the DC Metro area over professional-development and networking events organized by Holman and Cheeks. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, they pivoted to maintain the momentum, moved to the virtual environment, and opened it up to others outside of the local region. Seemingly overnight they began to see event registrations skyrocket to 800 people around the country.

Cheeks and Holman attribute this level of involvement and attention to being at the right place at the right time with the right idea. However, it's a bit more than that as well. These women were able to read the room and have worked hard to deliver a socio-politically on-time response. Regardless of how you look at it, as Butina comments, "What started as a LinkedIn group became a pretty big deal."

Now Cheeks and Holman have taken *Blacks in I/O* to the next level and are in the process of formalizing it as an official nonprofit organization. As stated on their website, their established mission is "To uplift Black voices and experiences within the industrial-organizational psychology industry through continued education, mentorship, networking, and awareness-building. We curate events and products addressing disparities unique to the Black community."

***Blacks in I/O* goals**

- Foster a community of diverse I-O academics and practitioners
- Increase the presence of African Americans in the I-O industry
- Increase awareness of the I-O industry at educational institutions nationwide, especially minority-serving institutions
- Build a pipeline of diverse and informed I-O candidates
- Promote a nationwide understanding of the unique experiences that African Americans face in the workplace and serve as a vehicle to enable conversations and evidence-based solutions
- Empower and equip our members with the tools, language, and resources to address disparities unique to minorities

Membership

The group welcomes anyone who is interested in supporting their efforts, and it offers three different membership levels: *student and student ally*, *professional and professional ally*, and *honored professional*. Their website details each membership level, and all membership levels come with access to a rich index of resources on diversity and inclusion.





Community

Impact



Despite its short history, *Blacks in I/O* is already actively driving the impact it seeks through its member-led committees (membership services and engagement, volunteer and *pro bono* projects, social media marketing and communications, business development and partnerships, and special projects). They are also building and maintaining partnerships with I-O-related groups and organizations such as PTC/MW and The Otherwise Invisible Consulting group.

The Otherwise Invisible Consulting group is a pro bono consulting organization supporting businesses and individuals who otherwise would not have access to such services.

The group's **Law Enforcement Task Force** formed after the first community call and has hit the ground running. The 25 task-force members are working hard to produce the first of its white paper series on selection and assessment in law enforcement.

Law Enforcement Task Force

Purpose: The purpose of the *Blacks in I/O* Law Enforcement Task Force is to combine efforts from multidisciplinary professionals to address the systemic societal issues of racism and bias, and how they are manifested in law enforcement. Together we will plan and strategize ways to use our professional expertise to make an impact for the Black community.

Scope: The task force, and its partner organizations, shall be representative of the expertise required to guide and support policing reform. Members of the task force should include personnel with the capacity and capability to achieve the organization's agenda.

Partnering organizations could include those with expertise in

- police executive organizations (i.e., NOBLE)
- criminal justice/legal
- mental health support groups
- policy writers/equity advocacy groups
- community-based organizations

Cheeks and Holman also have begun to conduct outreach with HBCUs, starting with Howard University, where they have presented an intro to I-O with undergrads in psychology courses. Next, they aim to partner with schools like Morgan State University, Coppin State University, University of Maryland Eastern Shore, and Spellman College. Although the short-term goal is to promote awareness through presentations, they hope to permanently influence undergrad curricula to include I-O as a topic at minority-serving institutions.

Blacks in I/O also is in the process of forming a mentorship program. They are currently looking for participants, both mentors and mentees.

A look at their 2020 activity, where they held over a dozen events, gives promise for an exciting 2021. The group is using the winter to plan for 2021 programming, on top of the ongoing initiatives.

From a longer term vantage point, Cheeks and Holman hope to continue growing the group's national footprint, eventually to create their own conference focusing on these issues and to continue identifying ways they can create a more fair, equitable, and inclusive community. They also intend to find ways to work in a more formal capacity with the SIOP organization, and they aim to influence SIOP conference programming to be more representative and reflective of their realities.

How You Can Help

So how can you support *Blacks in I/O*? Says Cheeks, "If you want to help, if you want to have hands-on interaction with the day-to-day of *Blacks in I/O*, we are always accepting committee members. So we'd ask that you navigate to our website, join our team where we have a detailed list of each of our committees and what they do. Then you can apply to help. It's a volunteer base, but these committees really help drive all of the work that you see. [Also] if you wanted to donate, we have a Donate button down at the bottom, and you can donate whatever amount you decide, one dollar, ten dollars, everything helps us in just setting up infrastructure, like our website, email accounts for our committee members, maintaining zoom accounts, and different things like that."

This is the time to get involved. Go navigate over to their website, request to become a member, join a committee, donate if you can, check out the resources they offer, do something. Let's come together as an industry, as a community, as an I-O family, and let's all be part of the solution.

Lessons learned in creating *Blacks in I/O*:

Take help when it's offered. Don't let pride get in the way.

Don't grow overly anchored on your original idea. Be open to adapting, because as your group becomes more widely known, you will hear a variety of perspectives. Create the group that best serves the people, not that just best serves your original idea.