COMMENTARY

Finding "work" in grand challenges: Lessons from extremism research and a call to action

Matthew P. Crayne

School of Business, University at Albany, Albany, NY, USA
Email: mcrayne@albany.edu

In their focal article, Mullins and Olson-Buchanan (2023) make several pointed appeals for I-O psychology to "do more" and "be more" as a scientific discipline, setting an aspirational target for how our field can and should make a broader social impact. Such calls are not new, as the authors note, nor are they isolated to I-O psychology specifically. Similar refrains can be seen in calls to address society's "grand challenges" in adjacent fields like management (George et al., 2016), suggesting a persistent longing to see these areas influence the world beyond their defined niches. The question is therefore raised: If we want to address grand challenges, why haven't we?

A likely culprit is functional fixedness. Concepts like "work," "organization," "employee," and "leader" have clear meanings to I-O psychologists, but those meanings are inherently biased by our discipline's culture, training modalities, and prior research. As such, we are likely to overlook problems, questions, and contexts to which our theories and insights are well suited because they do not look like "work" on the surface. To break this functional fixedness, I-O psychology must find a way to identify "work" problems in areas that are not obviously about work. The recommended use of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDG) is a good starting point given its breadth of scope and cross-disciplinary visibility (see also George et al., 2016). However, we should approach such frameworks with an understanding that they are *goals*, meaning that they have not yet been achieved and that achieving them requires scholarly work that tackles the problems directly. Although it is true that the current corpus of I-O psychology knowledge can meaningfully add to important discussions in these spaces, solving grand challenges requires direct, head-on work more than skirting around the edges through framing, theorizing, and pontificating. As a field, we must find a way to encourage scholars to engage with the societal problems that their work can help to solve rather than settling for drawing post hoc conceptual connections after conducting more traditional I-O psychology research.

Finding work problems in grand challenges: Extremism research as an example

Mullins and Olson-Buchanan call on I-O psychologists to "broaden our focus." The focal authors identify a limitation in the field's self-defined sphere of influence, which we often constrain to traditional, for-profit, white-collar business enterprises. Research which does take place in nonbusiness contexts (e.g., hospital teams) very often assesses processes and outcomes that are business like (e.g., firm performance, turnover, and team cohesion), and is caveated in the discussion section of a paper for its generalizability to the broader organizational or management landscape. As a field, I-O psychology needs to develop an ability to identify organizational problems that are caused by nonorganizational phenomena or manifest in nonbusiness environments. Referring to the UNSDG 17, grand challenges like poverty, persistent hunger, health inequality, and educational disparity can impact, and often directly cause, problems of

organization. However, a significant proportion of these issues arise outside of the confines of business-like contexts (see George et al., 2016), requiring a more nuanced view of what constitutes an organization and "work" problems in those spaces.

One emerging area that can be used as an example of this process executed well is extremism research. Extremism is a phenomenon that is very often the outcome of grand challenges, manifesting as a social and political reaction to seemingly immovable obstacles to social and economic progress. Sustained poverty and economic inequality, for example, are well-established antecedents for the localized development of religious and political extremism (Berger, 2018). Racial, religious, and economic persecution are also likely to increase the prevalence and social attractiveness of extremist positions and motivate hostile actions toward percieved institutions of oppression (Berger, 2018). People in dire circumstances are more likely to embrace extremist ideas and use destructive strategies to change their circumstances. As such, organizations that are formed and shaped under such conditions are likely to do so under the influence of extremist factions, and attention to extremism's role in socio-organizational and institutional processes is essential for developing a complete understanding of the problem's scope.

Extremism is most often studied in fields like political science, criminology, and social psychology. In recent years, however, a small number of I-O psychologists and management scholars have recognized the use case of applied psychology concepts in extremism research. Ligon et al. (2013) made arguments for conceptualizing how violent extremist organizations operate under the same social, structural, and economic rules as businesses or other "normative" organizations. These connections prompted Hunter and colleagues (2017) to ask whether there were lessons to be learned about how extremist groups attract and select would-be terrorists through the vast body of knowledge on recruitment and hiring in I-O psychology. The authors noted that violent extremist groups manage human capital in much the same way as businesses, and that these organizations are far more strategic and deliberate in their personnel strategy than popular sentiment would lead you to believe. Hunter and colleagues (2017) further argued that by disabusing themselves of an assumption that extremists are disorganized, scholars could use established concepts from I-O psychology to develop better models for the attributes that make for a "good" terrorist and the conditions that make extremist "work" a viable (or necessary) option. These ideas translated back to criminology and security studies, where Windisch et al. (2018) found that extremist groups become more sophisticated and diverse in their approach to talent recruitment as they mature, engaging in behavior that draws parallels to corporate headhunting. This work could, in principle, be used not only to identify populations that are most at risk for radicalization and recruitment to violent groups but also to clarify possible interventions to extremist group success in personnel selection.

Just as organizational psychology can contribute to understanding how extremists organize, so too can it be used to explore how social and cultural extremism impacts traditional organization. In an excellent essay by Chrispal and colleagues (2021), for example, the authors challenge organizational science to contend with the issue of caste as a set of institutional precepts that significantly influence how and where people organize on the Indian subcontinent. Caste is not only a reflection of some grand challenges posed in the UNSDG (i.e., modern slavery, per Chrispal et al., 2021) but also certainly contributes to the persistence of others. Research investigating how nation-states, political parties, and business firms can mitigate or overcome profound social challenges like caste, in hiring, teaming, or social network creation, for example, can itself work to address other grand challenges.

The above stand as examples of the broader point raised in this commentary, that expanding the reach and influence of our work requires engaging with questions that appear far afield of I-O psychology. In doing so, we can identify small but essential pieces of grand challenges that we are uniquely positioned to help solve. Such work may seem incremental, but addressing grand challenges is a cumulative effort built from methodical, multidisciplinary progress. Myriad grand challenges can be framed in a similar way if I-O psychologists are willing to look deeply at these

problems for their embedded organizational questions. However, this process must be active; we cannot rely on other fields to call for our assistance or recognize that we have something to contribute.

What's next?

If we believe that I-O psychology can and should contribute to the resolution of grand challenges, but also that there are barriers to motivating the direct, multidisciplinary work that is needed to do so, what should our course of action be as a field? This is a challenging and layered question but, though they may be fraught, not one without answers. Below, I suggest three starting points that will help I-O psychology maximize its impact on grand challenges.

Embrace our multidisciplinarity

Grand challenges require collaboration, and not just between specialties of a given field. To the contrary, I-O psychology cannot ever hope to meaningfully impact grand challenges if we do not actively draw from and collaborate with people from different schools of thought and scientific training. To properly engage with the important societal problems of our time, I-O psychologists must embrace a role as contributors in conversations that occur outside of traditional workplaces. Moreover, we must welcome, accept, and encourage collaboration from scholars in different areas who may bring a new perspective, method, or mode of questioning that allows us to see problems differently than we have before. Embracing a multidisciplinary approach to scholarship, both in its process (e.g., collaborators, funders, and paradigms) and in its intended outputs (e.g., journals, conferences, products), is essential to expanding the reach and importance of I-O psychology research.

The largest obstacle to this suggestion is institutional. Academic I-O psychologists are incentivized to conduct research that is appealing to and publishable in top-tier applied psychology and management outlets, limiting the scope of research questions with which they will engage with. Some journals have recognized this as an issue and amended policies to encourage more cross-disciplinary work, *The Leadership Quarterly* being a good recent example. However, even mass adoption of a multidisciplinary perspective in our journals will not fully address the issue because those journals remain targeted at a narrow audience. The focal authors are shrewd here, noting that "we will naturally be limited in our impact so long as I-O psychologists continue to talk primarily to other I-O psychologists." A truly multidisciplinary field is one that encourages its members to disseminate their work widely, in outlets beyond their usual scope to be read and digested by a diverse network of scholars. This again requires that we move out of our comfort zones and look for ideas and areas of research in other fields to which we can make a substantive contribution. What conversation can we be a part of? Which fields can be aided by an I-O psychology lens? Although it is a tall order, removing the institutional barriers to this degree of scientific collaboration is critical step to broadening our relevance, influence, and impact.

Train in areas outside of I-O

Related to the prior point, an embrace of multidisciplinary thinking begins with multidisciplinary training. In the short term, this may look like graduate-level seminars including guest lectures or literature from alternative disciplines that have an organizational or work-related aspect. Research from sociology or economics regarding the role of climate change in labor organization, for example, may add perspective and spark research questions for developing scholars that they would not have considered before. Indeed, without being exposed to such information we may not even know *how* to think about grand challenges, as there will be no frame of reference from which to draw. In the long term, I believe that I-O psychology programs should consider collaborative

arrangements with such departments that allow, if not require, students to take classes. It is common for I-O programs to have "breadth" requirements, but these are most often limited to courses within other psychology disciplines or, at best, in the business school. But there is a great deal to be gained from learning with and from philosophers, economists, educators, historians, and anthropologists, to name but a few. Interaction begets understanding, understanding begets collaboration, and collaboration begets the potential for breakthroughs. This becomes infinitely harder to achieve if we remain isolated in our I-O psychology bubble and perpetuate that isolation to the next generation of scholars.

Believe that we have value to add

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, to make a truly indelible mark on society, we must collectively believe that we are able to do so. We cannot fall victim to a disciplinary imposter syndrome, which convinces us that we are too small, too niche, or too inconsequential to make a real difference. When we view these issues as beyond our scope, society must rely on other disciplines, those more willing to step outside of their direct areas of expertise, to solve for the organizational elements of complex problems. What do economists, political scientists, social psychologists, biologists, and others know about work and organizing that I-O psychologists do not?

I-O psychologists must recognize that they have expertise and perspective that can add real value to these efforts, and that our field has a great deal to say about things that matter. After nearly 150 years as an active scientific discipline, the collective perspective and experience of our field can be relied upon for insights into a myriad of topics, many of which we forget that we know about until we are forced by circumstance to remember. For as much as we can be aided by opening ourselves to opportunities to learn from and engage with other fields, so too can they make breakthroughs because of our knowledge and expertise. To "be more," as the focal authors call us to be, begins with recognizing that we *can* be more.

References

Berger, J. M. (2018). *Extremism*. The MIT Press.

Chrispal, S., Bapuji, H., & Zietsma, C. (2021). Caste and organization studies: Our silence makes us complicit. *Organization Studies*, **42**(9), 1501–1515. https://doi.org/10.1177/0170840620964038

George, G., Howard-Grenville, J., Joshi, A., & Tihanyi, L. (2016). Understanding and tackling societal grand challenges through management research. *Academy of Management Journal*, **59**(6), 1880–1895. https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2016.4007

Hunter, S. T., Shortland, N. D., Crayne, M. P., & Ligon, G. S. (2017). Recruitment and selection in violent extremist organizations: Exploring what industrial and organizational psychology might contribute. *American Psychologist*, **72**(3), 242–254. https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000089

Ligon, G. S., Simi, P., Harms, M., & Harris, D. J. (2013). Putting the "O" in VEOs: What makes an organization? *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict*, **6**(1–3), 110–134. https://doi.org/10.1080/17467586.2013.814069

Mullins, M., & Olson-Buchanan, J. (2023). Moving boundaries on what I-O has been, and what I-O can be: The United Nations sustainable development goals as an organizing framework. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology*, **16**(4), 479–494.

Windisch, S., Logan, M. K., & Ligon, G. S. (2018). Headhunting among extremist organizations: An empirical assessment of talent spotting. *Perspectives on Terrorism*, **12**(2), 44–62. https://doi.org/10.1016/0167-6911(94)00020-V