Industrial and Organizational Psychology (2024), **17**, 439–442
doi:10.1017/iop.2024.40

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

COMMENTARY

The scientist–practitioner gap: A call to end the debate

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Writing from an academic and small business perspective, Zhou and colleagues (2024) shed light on the scientist–practitioner gap in industrial-organizational (I-O) psychology and invite collegial debate by delineating seven multifaceted questions in their focal article. In our commentary, we discuss these questions and espouse the following viewpoints: (a) the scientist–practitioner gap is indeed overstated; (b) changing the way that journal articles are written for the sake of reaching a wider audience would require additional training of doctoral students, learning new methodological skills, and putting more pressure on tenure-track faculty; (c) the scientist–practitioner gap does not matter to any of the four types of I-O psychologists (Olenick et al., 2018); and (4) the scientist–practitioner gap is not an individual actor problem.

Is the scientist–practitioner gap overstated?

In the 1993 film *Groundhog Day*, actor Bill Murray portrays a television weathercaster who visits the town of Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania, to report whether the local groundhog, Phil, will see his shadow, signaling another 6 weeks of winter (Almond, 2006). Murray's character continues to repeatedly relive the same day, February 2, beginning with his alarm sounding at 6:00 a.m., a cycle that continues until the end of the film (Almond, 2006; Daughton, 1996). Similarly, the scientist–practitioner gap resembles the plot that unfolds over and over in *Groundhog Day,* as scholars continue to relive and revisit the same overarching debate. Thus, it is unsurprising that the I-O literature is replete with studies chronicling the scientist–practitioner gap.

In their work analyzing Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology (SIOP) programs, Brice and Waung (2001) indicated that the scientist–practitioner gap appears to be shrinking. Aguinis et al. (2017) raised a similar issue in their investigation of the typology of literature that is frequently cited in I-O textbooks. The authors noted that "39% of the 110 most frequently cited sources mentioned in I-O psychology textbooks are nonacademic journals" (Aguinis et al., 2017, p. 545), thus signaling that the scientist–practitioner gap is overemphasized. Adopting a cynical perspective, Avolio (2017) called for a moratorium on further investigation of the scientist–practitioner gap and advocated instead for both science and practice to advance the I-O field through bridge building. We echo Avolio's (2017) viewpoint and argue that Groundhog Day should come to an end for the I-O community.

Should we change the way journal articles are written?

Zhou et al. posited an intriguing question regarding writing journal articles in a manner that sparks engagement with those from outside one's immediate domain. We consider this notion tantamount to opening Pandora's box and therefore disagree with this premise on three grounds.

First, doctoral education seeks to train students to conduct research and write in a manner that is consistent with their primary discipline. In other words, doctoral students are cultivated to become specialists in a particular field. A departure from this paradigm, for the sake of reaching a wider audience, would require reeducating doctoral students to master not only the writing-specific nuances of their field but also other disciplines that might be tangentially related at best. Second, research methods are often field specific, and I-O is no different (Austin et al., 2002). Would writing to an audience outside of one's immediate discipline necessitate mastery of different methodological techniques? If so, how will junior scholars find time to develop the requisite skills while under the pressure of a ticking tenure clock? Third, changing the way in which journal articles are written presents a unique challenge to tenure and promotion committees charged with the daunting, high-stakes task of evaluating their colleagues' scholarship. How do senior faculty members evaluate the publications of a junior faculty member when the articles do not look and sound like what they are accustomed to? In short, we disagree with the idea of adapting journal articles to be written such that outsiders could read and interpret their findings. Furthermore, we contend that this would pose challenges that place an undue burden on graduate students and tenure-track faculty and that such challenges far outweigh any potential benefits.

Does the scientist–practitioner gap even matter?

We applaud Zhou and colleagues for positing this thought-provoking question and hold the view that this is an appropriate time to take stock of the members in the I-O field, examine their primary function in the discipline, and, furthermore, explicate the process that allows for career advancement. Olenick et al. (2018) identified a four-way typology of I-O psychologists: pure scientists, scientist–practitioners, practitioner–scientists, and pure practitioners. We argue that all four types of I-O psychologists would not benefit from eliminating the scientist–practitioner gap, both regarding their intended function and personal rewards.

Pure scientists hold academic positions and are expected to produce scholarship that meets their institution's criteria for earning tenure. Moreover, pure scientists are not rewarded for investigating or researching practitioner-focused issues (Olenick et al., 2018). These constraints on pure scientists' career advancement indeed separate academic theory from applied practice. Consequently, we argue that the scientist–practitioner gap does not matter to the pure scientist.

Scientist–practitioners occupy a hybrid role in I-O psychology in which they are primarily employed in a university setting but are also willing to collaborate with organizations to design and implement best practices (Olenick et al., 2018). Moreover, as noted by Olenick et al. (2018), scientist–practitioners are often incentivized to publish in scholarly journals, further prioritizing research over practitioner-focused work. That is not to say that scientist–practitioners do not engage in meaningful applied work but rather that it is not recognized by universities in the same light. Conversely, nonacademic organizations employing scientist–practitioners place less emphasis on publication and more on solving applied problems.

The role of a practitioner–scientist is the opposite of that of a scientist–practitioner, as the former is typically employed by organizations, consulting firms, or government agencies and sustains currency either by publication or through collaboration with academics (Olenick et al., 2018). Although practitioner–scientists are perhaps intrinsically motivated to publish, they seldom receive tangible benefits from organizations for doing so. In the focal article, Zhou et al., question whether it is beneficial to keep academic theory and applied practice separate. We contend that it is worthwhile to separate the two and furthermore postulate that the scientist–practitioner and the practitioner–scientist are prime examples of how this strategy is already successful. As such, we posit that the scientist–practitioner gap does not matter to scientist–practitioners or to practitioner–scientists.

https://doi.org/10.1017/iop.2024.40 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Pure practitioners place less emphasis on science compared to academics (Brooks et al., 2003) and are largely concerned with satisfying organizational needs (Olenick et al., 2018). In contrast to pure scientists, who primarily concentrate on research, "most nonacademic I-O psychologists are not actively engaged in research or research publication" (Murphy & Saal, 1990, p. 51). The lack of attention to scholarly research on the part of the pure practitioner makes sense, as they are not rewarded for scholarly accomplishments in the same manner as a pure scientist. Therefore, as in the case of the pure scientist, we surmise that the scientist–practitioner gap does not matter to the pure practitioner.

The scientist–practitioner gap is not an individual actor problem

The scientist–practitioner gap more closely resembles a collective action problem in the field of I-O psychology. Thus, the four types of I-O psychologists, at the individual level, might have even less motivation to change their position. Moreover, because the issue is collective rather than individual, there may be less benefit to individual actors in addressing the scientist–practitioner gap.

Conclusion

The goal of our commentary is to answer the call of Zhou et al., by providing a perspective on the scientist–practitioner gap in I-O psychology. Although we agree with Zhou and colleagues' assertion that much ink has been spilled on this topic in the I-O domain, we believe that continued research in this area is unlikely to produce any significant changes in the discipline. First, these conversations largely occur in scientific journals that are predominately read by academics. Second, if a limited number of practitioners are even aware of such scholarship, they apparently lack an incentive to enter the conversation, thus resulting in a dialog between scientists with little input from practitioners. In adopting our position, it is our hope that the I-O discipline can put aside this long-standing debate and instead focus on advancing academic theory and applied practice, both pillars of the field, as separate yet equally important entities.

Acknowledgements. I thank Matt C. Howard for helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper.

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Cite this article: Stroud, M. (2024). The scientist–practitioner gap: A call to end the debate. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology* **17**, 439–442. https://doi.org/10.1017/iop.2024.40