


FOCAL ARTICLE

# Moving boundaries on what I-O has been, and what I-O can be: The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals as an organizing framework

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## Abstract

Even before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, and especially since, I-O psychology has demonstrated its ability to adapt and to make meaningful contributions to how work is accomplished in tumultuous environments. Such contributions reflect the ongoing evolution of the field and an increased awareness of the potential for I-O psychologists to effect meaningful societal change. We believe that I-O psychology must embrace this evolution and, using the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals to help us target our efforts, become a resource and a voice for workers and organizations around the world, and a force for the greater good.

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[The] problem which is here concerned is one which must appeal to the interest of every psychologist who besides being a “pure scientist” also cherishes the hope that . . . [their] findings may also contribute their quota to the sum-total of human happiness . . . The problem is so far-reaching that one finds it difficult to determine whether the burden of its significance attaches to its psychological, its economic, or its social aspects. (Hall et al., 1917, p. 6)

In 1917, when Hall, Baird, and Geissler penned their foreword to the first issue of the *Journal of Applied Psychology*, the world was in crisis. The First World War had been raging for almost 3 years and would only end over a year later, 10 months into the 1918 influenza pandemic. The Great Migration of African American workers from southern states to urban centers in the northern states fueled racial tensions and had marked effects on the labor movement (Brown, 2014). Into all of this, and more, psychologists were beginning to create the infrastructure for a science of applied psychology in the workplace. The field of industrial-organizational (I-O) psychology, as we know it, did not exist and would not for quite some time. Nonetheless, Hall et al.’s (1917) vision for a field that transcended “pure science” and pushed toward a greater good, with the potential to effect both economic and social change, resonates over a century later. Although we too face crises, I-O psychology’s boundaries have shifted. We have the potential to influence the world in ways that Hall et al. (1917) likely never foresaw.

The expansion of I-O psychology to develop new skill sets that serve to address broader problems is consistent with what MacLachlan (2014) describes as “macropsychology.” Drawing a

parallel to macroeconomics and microeconomics, MacLachlan points out that it was only after the Great Depression that the field of economics moved away from narrow (i.e., “micro”) questions about specific organizations and/or business sectors, and began to ask larger (i.e., “macro”) questions that required data that cut across regional, national, or industry boundaries. As the complexity and richness of economic data grew, the field of macroeconomics became increasingly prominent.

In many respects, the shift to a broader “macropsychology” perspective is well underway, at least methodologically. Data science, “big data,” and machine learning have made the aggregation and analysis of complex multinational datasets possible (MacLachlan, 2014), and provide us with the opportunity to begin to examine not only the individual and organizational factors that affect work and workers but also the broader systemic and cultural factors. With our methods having evolved, it only makes sense that we take advantage of the increased sophistication and evolve the questions we ask. Just as the field of economics came to embrace macroeconomics as a critical discipline, so should psychology embrace macropsychology and use it to address questions that matter but that may have previously been outside our scope or require attention to variables of setting and context (MacLachlan, 2017) that may not have been considered in our analyses. The current state of the world makes such an expansion both appropriate and, we would argue, necessary for the continued evolution of our field. Expanding our reach by addressing new and emerging problems creates opportunities for I-O psychology on a global scale.

Of the many crises affecting us, one of the most salient remains the COVID-19 pandemic, which has taken millions of lives. Although the full effects of the pandemic on our field may not be fully identified for years, or decades, it has forced us—not simply I-O psychologists but people and organizations around the world—to critically reevaluate what we do and why. We give it a central position in our arguments because it has required many changes be made. By the same token, though, it presents the opportunity for still more changes.

The pandemic highlighted existing inequities that create dramatically different levels of risk. For example, Pirtle and Wright (2021) utilized intersectional analysis to demonstrate that the positions occupied by women of color across occupations, and particularly in healthcare institutions, created heightened risk for exposure to COVID-19. Combined with lower access to resources to mitigate the effects of the virus, the authors argued that women of color were at risk exceeding the well-documented difference in mortality rates across races (White Americans having a much lower age-adjusted COVID-19 death rate than Black, Latinx, Indigenous, or Pacific Islander Americans). These kinds of structural inequalities, given that they center in many cases around exposure in the workplace, *are within I-O psychology’s ability to influence*.

A reasonable question to ask is, simply, “How?” That is, how can I-O psychology influence these structural inequalities, to help address the disproportionate risk? We do not pretend to have a full answer to that question, and indeed, we hope that commentaries will offer insights on how other authors, or their organizations, have already engaged in such work, or how our field could be engaged in this work. It will take a concerted effort, with research that helps us better understand the complex dynamics of issues related to diversity, equity, inclusion, accessibility, and belonging (DEIAB) in the workplace, and rigorous best practices that help to address longstanding workplace biases and inequalities. None of the existing issues that the past few years have helped highlight are ones that can be addressed solely by academic researchers, or solely by practitioners. Empirically supported best practices, and a more inclusive and expansive research base, are needed. This is true for all of the issues we describe; when we call for I-O psychology to expand its focus, we reiterate a call that others (e.g., Bal et al., 2019; Gloss et al., 2017) have made in the past, and a call that we hope will continue to be made until it is no longer needed.

Although we provide the pandemic with a central place in our argument, it is important to emphasize that this is **not a paper about the pandemic**. Rather, we hope to use recent lessons from the pandemic to make a much broader case. After all, the pandemic is far from the only crisis facing the world. Increasing numbers of “natural” disasters threaten our safety, and although some

of these (such as the 2022 volcanic eruption near Tonga) have no obvious connection to human activity, others do. Reed et al. (2018), for example, created a statistical model of how much more severe Hurricane Florence was, accounting for human-caused climate change, than it would have been without. If climate change, and its effects on weather patterns, wildfires, flooding, and other natural disasters, has a human-caused component, then one level at which it might be addressed is with organizations, which are *within I-O's psychology's ability to influence*.

Political upheaval and violence remain prevalent in places like Nigeria, Afghanistan, and the Ukraine. Afghanistan continues to experience an ongoing humanitarian crisis with a strong psychological element. After over 4 decades of conflict, diagnosable levels of depression, anxiety, and posttraumatic stress disorder are present in over half of the Afghan population, but treatment is difficult to obtain (Saleem et al., 2021). Providing effective humanitarian aid to Afghanistan may necessitate providing increased access to mental health treatment and related resources, which are clearly outside the purview of what most I-O psychologists can do. Selecting and training aid workers, however, and otherwise advising humanitarian organizations on the best ways to serve those in crisis, are certainly *within I-O psychology's ability to influence*.

Finally, we would be remiss if we did not call out the very real racial tensions that persist both inside the U.S. and on a global scale, and the racial reckoning that is underway. The systemic racism that has marred so much of our collective history has been revealed, often in real time, with the horrific tragedies such as what happened to George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and far too many others. Some historians (e.g., Hammonds, 2021) have suggested that the current racial reckoning shares similarities with the post-Reconstruction period of the 1870s. Because I-O psychology has been involved in conversations around discrimination as part of our work for decades, there is every reason to suggest that we should continue to do what we can to be a positive force for change going forward.

### The case of COVID-19 and the workplace

Over the past 3 years, we have witnessed significant shifts in nearly every facet of our lives. The workplace, in particular, has experienced tremendous changes in both anticipated and unanticipated ways. It is clear that all of the issues we described in our introduction, and more, have changed both work and workers on many levels. By describing the pandemic's effects, it is our hope that this very salient example helps to stimulate both researchers and practitioners to continue to think broadly about the changes that have occurred in recent years, and the opportunities those changes have created.

From a health and safety perspective, SARS-Cov-2 introduced risk and uncertainty in the workplace on a level not experienced in recent memory. Early in the pandemic, protocols for mitigating risks were unclear and ever evolving. As people around the globe sheltered in place, we struggled to distinguish essential workers from nonessential workers. Jobs that had historically been considered relatively safe were now on the "front line," in terms of potential exposure to a virus that posed unprecedented risk to essential workers and their immediate families (Peters et al., 2022). Many employers, in weighing the risks of potential exposure for their employees (and clients), closed businesses temporarily or permanently. Today, with substantially more knowledge (about how the virus spreads, how to mitigate its spread, and how to treat the infected) and more access to the requisite protective gear and vaccines, businesses have largely reopened, but our workplaces have evolved in enduring and significant ways, particularly from a rapid adoption in automation (World Economic Forum, 2020) that allowed our economies to continue while reducing face-to-face contact. It is projected that such heightened adoption of automation will continue, particularly for work that traditionally has involved close physical proximity (Lund et al., 2021).

Another major shift in the workplace, especially for knowledge workers in high-income countries, is the significantly increased reliance on remote work or telework. Although initially used as a strategy for continuing to work while sheltering in place, increased creation and adoption of virtual technologies have paved the way for postpandemic remote work as well, including for occupations that previously were not considered feasible for such modality (Lund et al., 2021).

The workplace is experiencing significant labor shortages across industries due to a wide number of factors including the “Great Resignation,” a reduction in available childcare and elder care, long-COVID, and continued threats to safety and health in the workplace. Remaining employees (or newly hired employees, as the case may be) are “stretched to their limit” (Sheather & Slattery, 2021), with fewer coworkers to shoulder the burden or provide the historical knowledge to address workplace challenges. Supply chain disruptions placed additional pressure on workers to further increase productivity to meet heightened demands for products critical to our economic recovery (Bhattacharjee et al., 2021), yet we do not have enough labor to meet this increased demand.

### **An initial response**

From early in the pandemic, activity on SIOP’s web page made it clear that I-O psychologists were actively engaged in research on pandemic-related changes. On April 1, 2020, less than a month into the initial lockdown, SIOP offered short articles on stress management during COVID-19 (Curphy & Nilsen, 2020) and resilience (Hoopes, 2020). More articles followed and remain available on SIOP’s web page under the “Remote Work Resources” navigation category.

Also in April of 2020, the *Journal of Applied Psychology* (*JAP*) issued a call for pandemic-related papers to be reviewed using a Rapid Review format (Eby, 2021). The first of these studies (Sergent & Stajkovic, 2020), published under the “Understanding Work and Employment in COVID-19 Pandemic” heading, appeared in August 2020. The call ultimately generated 828 submissions and 50 published articles (Eby, 2022). In the spirit of transparency and open science, all COVID-related articles published by *JAP* as a result of this call were free to read through the journal’s website.

The breadth of topics covered only by the papers published in *JAP* is impressive. From work–family issues (e.g., Shockley et al., 2020), to issues of engagement (e.g., Andel et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2021), to the many challenges of remote work (e.g., Shao et al., 2021), and far more than can be easily listed here, I-O psychology as a field affirmed its commitment to building a science that addresses the workplace not simply as we want it to be but as it is. Work to address the many challenges of the pandemic continued to be reflected in the content of the 2022 and 2023 SIOP Annual Conferences. Examples of other organizations, and other journals, responding to the clear needs created by the pandemic could certainly be provided. We offer the initiatives undertaken by SIOP and *JAP* as two examples that demonstrate the field’s ability to respond quickly and, we would argue, effectively.

The fact that I-O psychology was able to “pivot” so relatively quickly should not be surprising. Work–family issues, work–life balance, engagement, motivation, leadership in crisis, managing turnover—these are all topics that have been part of what we do, as a field, for anywhere from years to decades.

As we pass this critical period, though, I-O psychology’s ability to help does not diminish. If anything, we suggest that the awareness of what we have contributed during the past 3-plus years should encourage us to continue finding ways to extend the good our field can do. There is a very real danger that, as we move further from mask mandates, lockdowns, and social distancing, the temptation to return to the prepandemic version of “normal” may be strong. To what extent have researchers and practitioners already moved back to that we were doing before 2020 upended our lives? To what extent is I-O psychology likely to back away from what we are capable of being and return to what we are *comfortable* being?

### What we could be, or what we *should* be

For all that I-O psychology has done, and for all that I-O psychologists have contributed to organizations around the world, questions remain about the direction of our field. We suggest that those questions call back to the words of Hall et al. (1917): Where does the “burden of our significance” lie? Certainly, the psychological significance of our work is key, but the “pure science” approach is only one aspect of what an applied discipline like ours seeks to accomplish. The economic significance of our work is also vital; if organizations cannot see bottom-line improvements, how likely are we to continue to find work? These first two are obvious, though. It is the last of Hall et al.’s three “aspects,” the social, to which we suggest I-O psychologists turn more attention. We can do more than provide evidence-based best practices, demonstrate ROI, and help organizations solve complex human problems—we can *be* more.

Ours is not the first call for an increasingly proactive, engaged, and socially aware evolution of I-O psychology. Gloss et al. (2017) and Bal et al. (2019) both put forward visions for a more inclusive and responsible discipline. The present call builds on some of the same themes and ideas as those of prior authors but approaches the topic with the context of recent events that both increase the urgency for change and demonstrate how well I-O psychology has already begun to shift its focus. Further, we argue for the use of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals as a framework to push us to think more broadly of the potential applications of our field as well as to better communicate its value to others engaged in this important work.

### Agents of change

When I-O psychologists talk about change, and managing change, the unit of analysis is often the organization. As a field, we have become adept at change management. Consultants in particular are often viewed as “change agents,” a term Ottaway (1983), in a taxonomic review of the topic, defined as someone who helps “a client system to change, from either the inside or outside, and in either a proactively initiated or reactively initiated relationship” (p. 363).

I-O psychology is in the position to serve as a change agent in a manner consistent with Ottaway’s (1983) treatment of the term. If the individual consultant can be a change agent for a single organization, the collective talents of the practitioner, academic, governmental, and other constituencies within I-O psychology offer the potential for broader change. Our field has long focused on both employee and employer well-being; with growing interest in humanitarian work psychology, we would argue that a third, equally (or more) critical area of focus has emerged: societal well-being (Olson-Buchanan et al., 2013).

To be effective societal agents of change, our integrative science–practice approach is needed. A prominent example of this is the work done in recent years by SIOP’s Government Relations and Advocacy Team (GREAT). Beginning in 2013, SIOP partnered with Lewis-Burke Associates, LLC, a prominent government relations firm, to build awareness of the potential for I-O psychology to provide science-based interventions to the federal government. GREAT resources already on the SIOP website include topics as diverse as policing reform, aiding veterans in returning to civilian work, and the contributions I-O psychology can make to understanding federal worker well-being postpandemic. One notable success resulting from these advocacy efforts was I-O psychology being added to the Department of Defense list of STEM disciplines, further supporting our recognition and visibility. Current GREAT Chair Kristin Saboe (personal communication, March 2023) shared that initiatives being pursued include work related to the Department of Justice’s Community-Oriented Policing Services and writing policy statements to address judicial concerns related to selection assessment. Both SIOP’s success in advocacy, and the success our field has found in working with organizations, show that we have the tools and techniques to make a difference on a larger scale. We have answered any number of important organizational problems, but the problems we have been addressing (e.g., worker satisfaction and

motivation, optimal hiring practices, effective leadership development) are not always the most pressing problems that we *could be* addressing (e.g., decent work for all, ending the cycle of poverty, identifying and remedying workplace inequality based on race, sex, or other characteristics). The work being done by GREAT shows that we are capable of broader influence.

The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on workers have highlighted areas in which I-O psychology might contribute. Cox (2020) described a number of issues that affected workers during the pandemic that I-O psychology has the potential to impact, though in many cases doing so requires us to expand our focus.

For example, social distancing early in the pandemic was relatively straightforward in some environments, particularly areas in which (a) workers could shift to remote work, (b) large workspaces existed, or (c) the overall population density was low. In more densely populated areas, though, or ones in which the technological infrastructure was less developed or workers had to work in tight quarters, social distancing was more difficult (or impossible). Socially distancing, in other words, was easier to do in more economically stable/prosperous regions. Identifying ways to make it possible in less-advantaged areas is something I-O psychology could have contributed.

The early shutdowns also hit some workers and industries harder than others. Most I-O psychologists focus their work on organizations that are part of the “formal economy” (Mullins et al., 2021). The “informal economy,” which includes both the “gig economy” (Kuhn, 2016) and various legal (if unregistered) organizations (Nichter & Goldmark, 2009), employs the majority of the world’s workers (ILO, 2019). Shutting down the informal economy, however, is difficult; organizations that are unregistered and unregulated are not answerable to those who order such shutdowns, so if an organization that is part of the informal economy shuts down during a pandemic, it is less likely because of what a virus like COVID-19 *might do* than what it has *already done* (Cox, 2020). This is devastating to such workers, who face threats to physical and psychological safety often because their lack of economic safety forces them to continue working. I-O psychology’s focus on workers in the formal sector ignores enormous numbers of individuals who would benefit from our insights and assistance. The good news (such that there can be “good news” related to the pandemic) is that it’s not too late. Issues of economic recovery and how to assist workers and organizations in recovering from an event like the pandemic are heightened in “less developed” (Cox, 2020, p. 351) countries, which will likely recover more slowly than organizations in the formal economy. We can, and should, turn more attention to workers outside the formal economy.

The pandemic also highlighted existing inequalities in the formal economy. For example, Dudley et al. (2022) asked readers to consider why so many female physicians were quitting. They argued that a high rate of workforce withdrawal for female physicians during the pandemic called attention to larger issues of gender inequality. After reviewing responses from over 200,000 physicians to a physician engagement survey, the authors’ recommended solutions included providing female physicians with greater flexibility, increasing respect, and improving equity in both advancement options and pay. Such suggestions are well within the scope of what I-O psychology can and should address, and reflect a potential for societal-level impact with regard to gender equality that we must pursue.

These are two recent, salient examples of ways I-O psychology can meaningfully expand its focus to impact societal well-being—an exhaustive listing could fill this issue, and we would anticipate that some of the commentaries on our paper may seek to do exactly that. As such, rather than continue to provide examples of what we *should* do, we will summarize: Consistent with the work of Gloss et al. (2017) and Bergman and Jean (2016), I-O psychology needs to broaden its focus. Too many working populations receive too little attention or no attention whatsoever. Gloss et al. (2017) described I-O psychology as having a “POSH perspective . . . focused on Professionals who hold Official jobs in a formal economy and who enjoy relative Safety from discrimination while also living in High-income countries” (p. 329). Clearly, such a perspective reflects a bias that must be addressed if we are to broaden our influence and create a science that is inclusive of the

experience of all workers. Our field has the potential to be an agent of change on a global scale. Now is the time to step up. Over the past 10–15 years, our field has evolved a foundation to do exactly that.

First, our field has witnessed the emergence of a new area of research and practice: humanitarian work psychology. Humanitarian work psychology is “the synthesis of I-O psychology with deliberate and organized efforts to enhance human welfare” (Gloss & Thompson, 2013, p. 353). Rooted in the Global Taskforce on Organizational Psychology for Development, a new organization was founded: the Global Organisation for Humanitarian Work Psychology, in 2013. Scholarly books on the topic were published in Carr et al. (2012) and Olson-Buchanan et al. (2013), and over the past decade there have been numerous chapters, conference presentations (cf. Moran et al., 2022), and journal articles on the topic. Indeed, initially identified as a nontraditional area, humanitarian work psychology is now listed as a topic area under the SIOP directory (under Prosocial).

Our professional societies have also established formal relationships with the United Nations. Following the path of the International Association for Applied Psychology, SIOP established itself as a nongovernmental organization with special consultative status to the United Nations in 2011. More than a decade later, the SIOP UN Team and SIOP members have established several initiatives that support the work of the United Nations and its entities (Foster et al., 2021). Further, SIOP as a professional society signed on to the United Nations Global Compact, as did several I-O psychology programs (Scott et al., 2013), further underscoring our commitment to social, economic, and environmental sustainability.

### Framing our collective work in the SDGs

The growth in humanitarian work psychology, SIOP’s work with the United Nations, and the rise in advocacy work in I-O psychology, provide the foundation for our field to move to the next level of meaningful societal impact. Our global society is facing unprecedented challenges; but to ensure our field has a seat at the table as organizations around the world seek to address these many challenges, we should actively pursue and communicate how our work aligns with the United Nations 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The 17 SDGs provide a common framing, set of goals, and language that is shared around the globe that unites individuals and organizations (of all types) who are concerned about and working toward the greater good. Framing our work around these 17 SDGs will encourage us to address heretofore underexplored societal challenges and will heighten the impact and visibility of our research and practice to ultimately effect positive societal change.

An important question to ask is why the SDGs represent the appropriate framework to guide the future development of the field. Other frameworks exist, which may seem to initially be more aligned with I-O psychology’s focus. The Biden Administration’s “Build Back Better” framework (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/build-back-better/>), for example, overlaps in meaningful ways with the SDGs. It calls for increased efforts to combat climate change, a focus on clean/renewable energy and sustainability, an expansion of high-quality educational opportunities, investments in equity and fairness, and more. Unlike the SDGs, though, it is naturally limited by national boundaries.

The World Economic Forum (WEF) has also presented a framework, in the form of The Davos Agenda, that offers a global perspective and in some cases points to specific actions that can be taken to create work that is sustainable and inclusive. Key recommendations from The Davos Agenda 2021 included the following: closing the skills gap by helping to improve access to better jobs, skills, and education; making workplaces more inclusive by understanding that diversity, equity, and belonging may be central to solving the major problems we face; and prioritizing health and well-being for our employees to improve motivation and engagement (Sault, 2021). These recommendations are clearly aligned with the way I-O psychology tends to “brand” itself in ways that the SDGs may not immediately seem to be. They are also, however, consistent with the

SDGs. As we reviewed other frameworks and models for thinking about how to describe the need for I-O to expand its perspective, we repeatedly found ourselves returning to the United Nations SDGs. They offer a breadth of vision that encompasses so much that global society needs that even though other frameworks may feel like an easier “fit” for I-O, no other framework allows us to think as broadly about where our contributions may be made or allows us to communicate the relevance of our science and practice to a wider audience.

A final compelling reason for I-O psychology to adapt the United Nations SDGs to guide our research and practice is that other members of the global community have already done so. On the practice side, authors (e.g., Huber et al., 2018) have recommended that organizations engaged in ESG disclosure utilize the SDGs (and other UN resources) in setting relevant targets; as such, there is an extent to which organizations may already be either pursuing the SDGs, or setting goals that are SDG-related.

In terms of research, a recent editorial in *Nature* (Vulnerable nations, 2021) presented data about where research related to the SDGs is currently being conducted. For topics related to increasing renewable energy, biofuels, and resilient crops (all topics tied to the SDGs), research has significantly expanded in what the editors referred to as “low-income” and “lower-middle-income” countries—with little to no notable change in research attention from wealthier countries, such as the United States. That research on these topics is increasing in the parts of the world where the need is likely greatest, but the resources least available, makes a strong case that these are topics for which the united attention of scientists and practitioners would allow for a meaningful and measurable impact. That little change seems to have occurred in the amount of research being done related to (most of) the SDGs in wealthier countries points to a disconnect between topics that are of critical global importance and the work being prioritized. We agree that other standards, such as those put forward by the WEF and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, may also provide useful guidance and encourage commentaries that illuminate the benefits of such approaches. Data demonstrating that those countries that are least resourced are nonetheless prioritizing research related to the SDGs, however, particularly combined with connections between the SDGs and ESG disclosure, leads us to strongly recommend the SDGs as a global, unifying, framework.

### United Nations 17 SDGs

The first set of global goals identified by the United Nations were the United Nations 8 Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) that focused on tackling “the indignity of poverty” ([www.undp.org](http://www.undp.org)). The MDGs are credited with marked reductions of people living in extreme poverty (reduced by 1 billion between 1990 and 2015), a 40% decrease in HIV/AIDS infections, and a 50% reduction in child mortality ([www.undp.org](http://www.undp.org)). Building on the success of the MDGs (whose timeframe ended in 2015), the 17 SDGs expanded the scope of the goals to include “universal goals that meet the urgent environmental, political and economic challenges facing our world” (United Nations Development Programme, 2022).

The 17 SDGs were adopted by the 192 member states as part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The goals were created from an extensive participatory process originating at the 2012 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. The 17 SDGs are described as an:

[U]rgent call for action by all countries—developed and developing—in a global partnership. They recognize that ending poverty and other deprivations must go hand-in-hand with strategies that improve health and education, reduce inequality, and spur economic growth—all while tackling climate change and working to preserve our oceans and forests. (United Nations, 2022)





Figure 1. United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

The goals are represented by eye-catching color icons/tiles that summarize the universal goals with short, memorable phrases, such as “no poverty” (SDG 1) or “zero hunger” (SDG 2) with a related graphic (see Figure 1). These representations make the universal goals more memorable, but behind these 17 tiles are 169 (total) rigorous targets and 232 indicators to measure progress on these targets and goals.

These universal goals resonate with individuals and organizations alike. As identified in PricewaterhouseCooper’s review of published reports of 1000+ companies in 31 countries, 72% of the organizations explicitly mentioned the SDGs in at least one of their public documents (McGill & Scott, 2019). This familiarity with and use of the SDG framework is further facilitated by the United Nations Global Compact—the world’s largest corporate social responsibility initiative with over 20,000 signatories worldwide. To continue to be a signatory with the UN Global Compact, businesses and nonbusinesses (e.g., SIOP) report on their work toward the 10 Principles of the Global Compact as well as how their work ties in with its global goals.

Arguably, there may not be one universal set of terms used with respect to prosocial mindedness in organizations, with some individuals and organizations using the terms *people, planet, profit* to refer to the triple bottom line, and other contexts using the terms *environment, social, and governance (ESG)*, particularly in the financial sector. However, the 17 SDGs provide a set of universal goals that, in many ways, span the terms and perspectives used with respect to working toward the greater good around the globe. Notably, the 17th SDG is “Partnerships for the Goals,” which underscores the importance of partnering with others to enhance societal well-being.

One way we can partner is to increase the societal impact of the work we are *already* doing by framing it and communicating it in the context of the 17 SDGs. For example, consider extant I-O psychology research on gender discrimination, the glass ceiling, and women in leadership. This collective work could contribute to the universal goal of SDG 5 “gender equality: achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls” and, for example, one of its targets “5.5 Ensure women’s full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life.” The key to maximizing our field’s societal impact in research and practice areas like this is communicating the relevance of our work and ensuring the implications of this work are available and accessible to be implemented to effect change. With respect to framing, the relevance of this work to SDG 5 could be explicitly discussed in the introduction and discussion sections in traditional research publications and included as

keywords to make it more searchable. To take it a step further, perhaps its collective impact could be calculated in a utility analysis. Other work in our wheelhouse, such as job design, automation in the workplace, and race-based discrimination and bias, would be relevant for other SDGs, such as “SDG 8 Decent Work and Economic Growth” and “SDG 10 Reduced Inequalities.” It will, however, take more than updating what and how we publish if we want to bring about lasting change.

### “Frames” and “boundaries”: A call to move beyond

As the world struggles to recover from a pandemic, and as we face war, famine, discrimination, and myriad other critical challenges, I-O psychology is (we believe) uniquely positioned to help effect meaningful change. That being said, there are frameworks that we have chosen to adopt, boundaries that we have set for ourselves, and limitations to what we can do that we have accepted. Because, to some extent, the way things are is the way things have been, and the way things have been has been “working.”

Except, of course, that it hasn’t. The Great Resignation, the increased shift to remote work, the continued rise of the gig economy, the recognition that work–life balance and self-care are critical not just to individual human beings but also to the well-being of the organizations that employ them—this all ought to be enough to tell us that **the way things have been has not been working**. Not as well as we might have thought, and in some instances not at all—and certainly not for everyone. We have, consistent with the observations of Gloss et al. (2017), created a science that does a reasonably good job with a narrowly defined population of workers and a narrow definition of “work.” Even within those parameters, though, we have not been successful in creating workplaces that are fair, just, and consistently supportive of worker well-being. The need to do better is not new, which is why ours is not, and should not be, the last call to action.

A problem that we must address, and that we hope commenters will consider, is how to push beyond the “call.” We have cited examples of authors offering exhortations to I-O psychology to do more, to *be* more, but putting it in writing is not enough. One challenge a reviewer led us to consider is that we will naturally be limited in our impact so long as I-O psychologists continue to talk primarily to other I-O psychologists. We need to consistently, emphatically, *advocate for* broader application of our science. In a recent *TIP* article, Smith et al. (2023) reported that familiarity with I-O psychology, and SIOP as an organization, is quite low among HR professionals, and almost nonexistent among HR professionals employed by the small (<500 employees) organizations that make up over 99% of U.S. businesses. If many HR professionals do not even know who or what we are, then the time has come to substantially broaden the conversation about how we can make a global difference.

The first thing that must happen is that we must work to translate our science for a broader audience. This “broader audience” should be both widely and narrowly conceptualized, but as you will see, the translation that we recommend would work at both levels.

### **Wide and narrow targeting**

At a wide level, we are all familiar with I-O psychology’s challenges around brand recognition. Is there any member of SIOP who has not had to devise multiple versions of an “elevator pitch” to simply explain what it is that we do? Phrases like “evidence-based practice” and “smarter workplace” roll off our tongues but fail to capture who we are. A need to expand our research and clearly communicate our value is obviously not new and has been cogently remarked upon in this journal on multiple occasions (e.g., Kurtessis et al., 2017; Rogelberg et al., 2022). We need to do more to translate our science (in its current state) to the broadest possible audience, which would include the workers of the world.

Yet, our ability to connect with, educate, and influence individual workers is limited. The volume of information available to an individual on any given day is sufficiently high that unsolicited attempts to educate may have little impact. If individuals seek us out, they can learn a great deal about who we are and what we do! If they do not, however—and Smith et al.'s (2023) recent findings suggest that even one of our most relevant, allied, constituencies, HR professionals, do not uniformly do so—then we need to revise our targeting. Narrower targeting would involve continuing to make in-roads with the organizations that employ the world's workers. The more we communicate our value to organizations—both in terms of bottom-line ROI and to the greater good—the more broadly our message will be heard. One way to approach this is through greater collaboration with HR. This becomes at least theoretically easier to accomplish given work by Alonso et al. (2017) emphasizing the successes that HR has had implementing evidence-based solutions deriving from I-O. Building on this relationship, and other relationships with key stakeholders and constituencies, can lead to a broader engagement with prosocial/humanitarian causes *to the extent that we can document a business case for doing so*. An effective business case would, we suggest, benefit from a single unifying framework.

We believe that the United Nations SDGs offer a framework that makes both “levels” of targeting possible, breaking down old boundaries and creating a new frame for I-O psychology that is less restrictive. The broad push to adopt the SDGs, via the United Nations Global Compact, makes it clear that increasing numbers of organizations (20,000+ participants worldwide) recognize the value inherent in the goals and have committed to collectively achieving these goals. As such, the SDGs are a “common language” and rallying point that I-O psychology can use to further increase its visibility and impact.

As we noted earlier, the SDGs provide a framework to think more broadly about what we can and *should be*. They also provide a framework for better communicating who we are and what we *can do* to multiple constituencies. What if, instead of saying that I-O psychology offers organizations evidence-based solutions, we said that I-O psychology uses science to:

- help identify and address sources of gender discrimination?
- help organizations understand the decision processes that lead to unfair discrimination based on race, and how to rectify it?
- help organizations understand and address the prevalence of food insecurity in their workforces?
- help organizations understand the experience of workers outside typical organizational structures?
- demonstrate both the financial and nonfinancial benefits of organizations engaging in outreach related to social causes?

Some of these examples tie directly to SDGs; others target the domain more broadly. Critically, we recognize that there are many I-O psychologists already engaged in exactly this kind of work or other work related to the SDGs. That research on humanitarian work psychology has been reflected in the work of I-O/WOP for over two decades, that the Global Organisation for Humanitarian Work Psychology exists, and that SIOP is formally connected to the United Nations are merely three recent manifestations of the interest and willingness I-O psychologists have shown in using what we know for the greater good. Our call takes nothing away from any of the excellent work that has been done but instead hopes to encourage more of this work and offers the SDGs as a framework that can be used by even more I-O researchers and practitioners going forward.

We would suggest, and hope, that commenters will take the question of how we define our SDG-related contributions and expand on it. There is much to be said about sustainability, for example, but there is also much that could be said about things SIOP members may take for granted (e.g., access to clean water and sanitation) or rarely consider at all (e.g., life below water).

Using the SDG framework to communicate the value of our field allows us to (a) be more specific about ways we can contribute, that (b) matter in the lives of *all* individuals (e.g., non-POSH workers), which (c) have the potential to affect organizational functioning in multiple ways for both traditional and nontraditional organizations, and that (d) draw on a common language that is increasingly familiar to organizations (particularly, but not solely, those who are UN Global Compact signatories). All of this allows I-O psychology to build on SIOP's relationship with the United Nations to both make a broad case for, and increase the visibility of, our many contributions. The increased interest in humanitarian work psychology over the past 2 decades (Carr et al., 2010, 2016) makes the adoption of a common framework both appropriate and necessary.

Here again, though, precision will be important. Mullins et al. (2021) suggested that there are two distinct "types" of activities that could be labeled as "humanitarian work psychology," which they denoted as HW-p and h-WP. The former—HW-p—they discussed in terms of the application of psychological research and findings to the work done in the humanitarian sphere. For example, an I-O psychologist consulting with a humanitarian aid organization would be engaged in the HW-p form of humanitarian work psychology.

Our focus is more broad and aligns with the h-WP version of humanitarian work psychology. We believe that the path forward for I-O psychology as a field must involve an increased awareness of, and focus on, humanitarian topics in more traditional/mainstream organizational contexts. This can involve greater integration of topics related to employee well-being, fairness, and sustainability into how we think about and guide organizations through their various change processes. More importantly, though, it can allow us to find new and vital ways to make a difference with the work that we do.

Because our work is not done in isolation, a key challenge is how to coordinate with colleagues in HR, legal, talent acquisition, and other disciplines with whom we frequently collaborate as we pursue these goals. We would suggest that models exist for this. Just as advocates for corporate social responsibility had to evolve their arguments to demonstrate the strategic value of socially responsible policies, so too can the case be made for the strategic value of a more "macro" perspective and a willingness to address difficult problems that may not seem to be immediately within our organization's sphere of influence. In fact, the arguments to be made to our colleagues and other stakeholders may be very similar to the arguments surrounding strategic CSR (e.g., Carroll & Shabana, 2010). That organizations have been receptive to ideas related to environmental, social, and governance (ESG) initiatives, which overlap at least somewhat with CSR but which derive more from the "investing" sector of the information spectrum, suggests that we may need to broaden our approach and the way we think about the business case to be made.

I-O psychology has a clear "comfort zone," which creates a narrow field of vision and biases as described by Gloss et al. (2017). Moving beyond that comfort zone is key and will take concerted effort to expand our scope. The commentaries in response to Gloss et al., offered pathways by which we can equip ourselves for this challenge, including seeking out transformative experiences to broaden our mindset (e.g., Olson-Buchanan & Allen, 2017), engaging in interdisciplinary research and practice (Ahmed et al., 2017), and embedding humanitarian work in our educational foundation for future generations of I-O psychologists (Oliveira, 2017).

This last is particularly critical. As one reviewer noted, it is impossible for us to change the field—to adopt an increased humanitarian focus, to consider a macropsychology perspective—if we do not shift our educational processes. This will not be a rapid change, but it is underway, and has been at least since the report of the I-O program at Purdue University joining the United Nations Global Compact was published (Mallory et al., 2015). Joining the UN Global Compact requires a commitment to incorporate the Global Compact's 10 principles into a program's curriculum, and the submission of a report of relevant activities every 2 years, but at a functional level very little has to change in how the program is run. Many programs already engage in project work with nonprofits, for example, and almost all include training related to topics such as DEIAB, fairness

and discrimination, and employee wellness. Encouraging future I-O practitioners and academics to think more broadly, to consider global and societal contextual variables, and to imagine how to utilize their skills in less obvious contexts or ways not only results in more robustly trained I-O psychologists, it also makes the discipline more relevant to those who may not want to pursue a “traditional” path. By diversifying and broadening our approach to educating I-O psychologists, whether by formally joining the UN Global Compact or simply integrating relevant content and practice into our curricula, we can ensure a thriving and diverse field of I-O psychology.

## Conclusion

The events of the past few years have underscored the opportunity for, and the ability of, I-O psychology to make a difference in areas of global concern including the pandemic, natural disasters, climate change, violence and political unrest, and social and economic justice. Although historically our field has focused on individual and organizational well-being, it is clear that societal well-being is a crucial criterion as well. Indeed, societal well-being is an important factor in the ecosystem that enables our organizations—our primary area of focus for decades—to flourish sustainably. To broaden our impact, though, we must continue to move beyond exhortations such as the one we offer and demonstrate our value on a global scale. We know SIOP members have engaged in such work and hope that our call elicits commentaries on what has been done, what is in process, and how challenges related to this work have been overcome. Our collective action in recent years has demonstrated how we are poised to serve beyond the boundaries of the formal economy/traditional organizations through our science and practice, including during times of crisis. I-O psychology has the foundation, skills, and moral imperative to be an agent of change. Using the common framework of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, we can translate the value of our science and practice to a broader society, as well as inform the direction of our future work.

Given that research related to many of the SDGs is already being conducted and in fact is increasing in areas of the world that are most in need of assistance more rapidly than it is in more prosperous countries (e.g., the U.S.; Vulnerable nations, 2021), to ignore their utility is to ignore a means of approaching global problems in a way that maximizes the probability of truly global solutions. If the SDGs push us outside our collective comfort zones, that can only be a good thing.

The boundaries we have set for our field are ours to break, and now, more than ever, is the time to break those boundaries and wield I-O psychology’s ability to influence and serve the greater good, and ultimately enhance the “sum-total of human happiness.”

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