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COMMENTARY

Decolonizing intervention assessment: Qualitative and interdisciplinary approaches to understanding "side effects"

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In their focal article, Watts et al. (2021) argue for greater attention paid toward the unintended effects of organizational interventions, identifying barriers to their present realization, and suggesting relevant paths forward. Here, we propose the authors' conceptualization of "side effects" may be the result of field-level biases plaguing industrial-organizational (I-O) psychology more broadly. For instance, in outlining seven "social forces that are to blame for this stagnation of knowledge" (p. XX), the focal authors insinuate that if only these social forces could be ameliorated, individual researchers could more readily address the stagnation of knowledge related to side-effects; we challenge that notion and further oppose the characterization of I-O psychologists as infallible victims of circumstance.

Put another way, we propose that humble acknowledgement of our fallibility with respect to our intentions, our interpretations, and our methods of inquiry may more readily address the issue of side-effects. We argue that this acknowledgment suggests greater use of techniques that better integrate practitioner knowledge, organizational or community-specific evidence, and the perspectives or experiences of the affected community (Briner & Rousseau, 2011). Given our field's tendency to prefer that which is quantifiable, we position qualitative methods as an undervalued methodology that is relevant to the present conversation and suggest that inductive research via qualitative methods is more tractable than currently suggested. Further, by adopting the perspectives of disciplines beyond I-O psychology that are more concretely committed to the decolonization of research methodologies, we suggest a more effective path forward to a broader understanding of organizational intervention assessment, including challenging what we ourselves consider to be side effects to begin with.

A decolonizing approach to the "side effect" conceptualization

Per Maori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2021), "research" as it is known is centered within the scientific paradigm of positivism, a long-standing result of European colonization. Positivism assumes knowledge is limited to what can be empirically measured (Glesne, 2019). Often, researchers limit concern to procedural and operationalized interpretations of natural phenomena, and subjective experience is eschewed in order to chase proposed truths measured and compared through Western methods and epistemologies (Braun et al., 2013; Smith, 2021). I-O psychology is not an exception. As a field, we place value and more readily publish studies that incorporate methods that facilitate causal interpretations and rigorous quantitative analyses. It is this bias, we propose, that diminishes our ability to effectively anticipate and identify unintended interventional outcomes, or side effects, to the extent which they may or may not exist.

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We suggest that the adverse consequences of this biased positionality may be mitigated through a commitment to developing an awareness of the biases, values, and incentives informing our research and practice (Smith, 2021). This includes consideration of how our identification and interpretation of interventional outcomes, or side effects, are influenced through a cultural- and discipline-bound understanding and measurement of labor and human experience. Considering an example from Watts et al. (2021), the authors explain adverse side effects in which leaders who use a protected leave of absence are affronted with career immobility. Alternatively, we challenge here the lens through which we reach the explication of criticizing accommodations meant to support worker well-being and qualifying adverse outcomes that should be bound to performance as side effects and instead begin to acknowledge the cultural norms that might equate recovery experiences to dwindling job involvement. Moving forward, we propose a path toward the decolonization of interventional assessment through an adoption of methods of discovery common to organizational practice and anthropological and medical sciences, though currently undervalued within the realm of I-O psychology, and more specifically academic inquiry.

A path forward: Qualitative and interdisciplinary methodologies

Qualitative research methods

Our proposition that the focal issue may be attributed to the lens through which one's identification, measurement, and determination of unexpected outcome valence suggests a set of slightly different challenges than those put forth by the focal authors. To meet these challenges, we must overcome the field's overreliance on quantitative approaches to inquiry and invest in the utility of qualitative approaches for measuring that which we do not know or anticipate. Though nondefinitive, qualitative inquiry can be described as the application of inductive and naturalistic approaches to exploring and interpreting phenomena with respect to the meanings that people bring to them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). With respect to intervention assessment, qualitative inquiry provides the opportunity for disarming our preconceptions of how a workplace intervention should (or should not) work and produces a rich understanding of the lived experiences of individuals and groups who define adverse side effects within organizations.

Approaches to qualitative inquiry are wide and varied, which lends to their utility for obtaining a realistic understanding of the effects of organizational interventions within both science and practice. For example, *ethnography* directs a researcher to immerse themselves in the lived world of participants in order to understand the social world of the individuals within that setting (Ormstrom et al., 2014), such as an organization or intervention site. Further, *participatory action research* is based on collaboration between participants, or practitioners, and an investigator to enact positive change via a cyclical process of implementation, evaluation, and adaptation (Byrne, 2019; Ormstrom et al., 2014). Finally, *phenomenological* approaches are useful for understanding how participants apply meaning to experience through conversation or text. This type of qualitative inquiry is frequently found within organizational practice through focus groups, semi-structured interviews, or open-response survey items.

Though our argument is that the underuse of qualitative methodologies allows an opportunity for influence relevant to issues raised in the focal article, this proposition for further incorporation of qualitative inquiry into I-O Psychology is not a new one. Within this journal, Pratt and Bonacio (2016) argue "inductive qualitative research is ideally positioned to understand changes that are affecting organizations, with the end result being theory elaboration or the emergence of new theories" (p. 696). Given that workplace interventions are intentional attempts to change structures or behaviors within the work environment, we uphold Pratt and Bonacio's sentiment and advocate for the promotion of qualitative inquiry as a mechanism for confronting our colonial and discipline-specific biases and better understanding the effects of our interventions on organizations.

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Interdisciplinary research and practice

To further mitigate the consequences of our field-specific biases, we propose greater recognition of disciplines better committed to decolonization through the application of interdisciplinary research, defined by Porter et al. (2006) as the integration of perspectives, theories, methods, and data from two or more disciplines of knowledge or practice. Such recommendations are in line with those previously expressed regarding the role of interdisciplinary work in I-O science. For instance, Landers et al. (2017) highlighted the field's missed opportunity to incorporate outer discipline perspectives through their evaluation of I-O psychology graduate program engagement in the publication of interdisciplinary research. Of the 53 programs examined, each had published at least *a few* interdisciplinary articles, though these articles were rarely found outside of management or human factors journals, largely overlooking disciplines such as education, anthropology, sociology, and the health sciences. In light of these findings, there is evident opportunity for the field to broaden its conceptualization of interdisciplinary research.

Disbursement of knowledge

If what we have described so far is true is a different question than whether or not acting on our advice is worthwhile. We believe that it is, not by focusing on how dominant certain approaches or perspectives are in I-O psychology (e.g. "theory mania," and deductive methods), but rather by reviewing the evidence that evaluates the application of inductive methods in I-O psychology. Pratt and Bonacio (2016) found that 5% of articles published between 2006 and 2013 in eight prestigious I-O psychology, organizational behavior, and human resources journals were purely qualitative (8% of articles when considering mixed methods as well). Though these researchers reasonably conclude that qualitative research is underused, they also gave clear evidence for the growth of qualitative and inductive methods in comparing their findings with previous efforts as well as via content analysis of editorial statements from their sample of examined journals. Additionally, newer outlets such as *Academy of Management Discoveries* and special issues encouraging inductive research (e.g. *Journal of Business and Psychology*; Spector et al., 2014) further suggest that avenues exist for this kind of research.

This is not an attempt to overstate the likelihood or prevalence of inductive work in our field but rather to clarify that possibilities do exist to publish high-quality inductive work. In other words, although deductive and quantitative research may be as dominant as Watts et al. (2021) suggest, concluding that researchers who wish to publish in top outlets, "are better off focusing their efforts on deductive approaches to research and ignoring research on side effects (p. XX)" ignores the qualitative efforts exemplified by the 277 articles identified by Pratt and Bonacio (2016) and unnecessarily demotivates future scholarship using this method of inquiry.

Conclusion

Here, we've discussed an alternative view regarding the role of researchers in both investigating and perpetuating the phenomena of interventional side effects. We see growing opportunities to conduct rigorous and influential research while also recognizing our responsibility to challenge the biases of our present lenses via decolonizing our methodologies and embracing qualitative and interdisciplinary approaches.

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