Industrial and Organizational Psychology (2026), **19**, 140–143
doi:10.1017/iop.2026.10072

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

COMMENTARY

Neutrality is a choice: How I-O psychology aligns with power

Lora Bishop

Psychology, DePaul University, USA
Email: lorambishop@gmail.com

The focal article by Lefkowitz and colleagues (2026) resurfaces a persistent pattern in I-O psychology: Organized labor is treated as marginal to the field's science and practice, even though unions are core institutions in employment relations. That stance is difficult to defend given that the right to organize is widely recognized as a basic human right (United Nations, 1948), and unions remain a central mechanism for improving safety, health, and well-being at work (Carriere, 2020; Vesper et al., 2025). I extend the focal argument by focusing on a mechanism that makes this pattern durable.

A field built for management, not labor

What many I-O psychologists label as "neutrality" is a product of our field's professionally socialized position that defaults to managerial and corporate interests while also treating power, class, and collective worker voice as "out of scope." Although this enables I-O practices to appear value free, especially in labor–management relations, neutrality is not a middle ground. It's a choice. When we avoid conversations around pay inequity at the C-suite level while simultaneously using people analytics to "optimize" significant layoffs, we do not stay outside the conflict. We stand firmly on one side of it: the organization, not the worker. This is hard to reconcile with frameworks that position decent work and worker rights as psychological and societal imperatives (Blustein et al., 2019) and with calls inside I-O to clarify who the field ultimately serves when interests diverge (Blacksmith & Schmittzehe, 2023). Arthur Kornhauser's (1947) foundational question, "Do we work on the problems of the private businessman, or on the problems of society?" has been answered repeatedly, although implicitly. Thus, the debate is not new. What is new is the field's continued insistence that our choices reflect neutrality rather than values.

Neutrality is produced, not found

Professional neutrality in I-O psychology is not an absence of values. It is a value system that is learned, reinforced, and rewarded. Graduate training and early career socialization teach students to treat employer-defined problems as the crux of "fixing" the workplace while treating collective worker institutions as political, ideological, or simply irrelevant. Over time, this produces an "apolitical" professional identity that is compatible with employer power and uncomfortable with institutions that explicitly negotiate, contest, or constrain that power. Prilleltensky (1990) long ago

© The Author(s), 2026. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike licence (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the same Creative Commons licence is used to distribute the re-used or adapted article and the original article is properly cited. The written permission of Cambridge University Press or the rights holder(s) must be obtained prior to any commercial use.

https://doi.org/10.1017/iop.2026.10072 Published online by Cambridge University Press

challenged the illusion of apolitical service in applied social science. Baritz's (1960) historical analysis similarly situated industrial social science as a servant of power. These critiques remain structurally relevant.

I-O psychology was never designed to engage with power dynamics directly, and it has largely avoided doing so. The I-O fields indifference to unions is sustained by the fields reluctance to address structural conflict and power differences between labor and management (Zickar, 2004). Neutrality becomes the label for that default. Lefkowitz and colleagues, argue persuasively that values shape ethics. The next natural extension is unavoidable: values also shape our practice. Ethical codes constrain conduct once work is accepted (APA, 2017); they rarely constrain what work is deemed acceptable in the first place. Although many structures shape professional behavior, they do not eliminate our own agency. Thus, my main argument: neutrality is enacted, reinforced, and defended by practitioners who benefit from it.

What we do not teach explains what we tolerate

The fastest way to see how neutrality is manufactured is to look at what is treated as foundational knowledge. The field's silence on labor history and law is not a curricular gap; it is an explanatory mechanism. Core I-O curricula heavily emphasize selection, performance management, engagement, and leadership, usually inside a unitary model of the organization. Topics that would make power dynamics explicit, such as labor law, collective bargaining, strike dynamics, unfair labor practices, and the institutional history of unions, are typically absent or elective. This absence has been noted for decades (Huszczo et al., 1984; Rosen & Stagner, 1980).

The omission matters because it shapes what students learn to notice, what they learn to ignore, and what they learn to treat as inevitable in the world of work. This is consistent with a broader social class myopia in psychology that makes collective worker institutions easy to treat as invisible (Lott, 2014). Health, safety, ergonomics, industrial hygiene, and vocational rehabilitation remain peripheral rather than foundational, despite longstanding arguments that worker health belongs squarely within I-O psychology (Ilgen, 1990; Quick, 1999).

Predictably, there are few faculty lines, dissertations, or research programs focused on unions, ensuring the cycle persists. This cycle of ignorance about labor leads to an incomplete and often misleading understanding of how I-O theories operate in practice. For example, when organizational justice is taught without grounding in labor law, it implicitly assumes that organizations will act fairly toward employees, even in contexts where they are legally permitted not to do so (e.g., employment at will). Similarly, when employee voice is framed as a discretionary behavior rather than a negotiated form of power, instruction obscures persistent power asymmetries between leaders and workers and minimizes the lived experiences of marginalized employees.

When neutrality becomes union avoidance

The neutrality story breaks down most visibly in union avoidance. The U.S. union avoidance industry is well documented (Logan, 2006), and I-O methods have been used as inputs, including assessments and surveys designed to identify pro-union sentiment or organizing risk (Zickar, 2001). This is not a historical aberration that we can ignore, especially in the light of the big data boom in our field. Even the field's origin stories, particularly those associated with the human relations movement, sanitized class conflict by portraying workers as irrational rather than constrained (Bramel & Friend, 1981).

The key point is not that all practitioners endorse union avoidance or that labor-facing work is always ethically straightforward. The point is that the profession has clearer cultural scripts for justifying employer-side work than for justifying worker-side work. That asymmetry is what neutrality looks like in practice: a professional norm that treats one side as the default client and the other as a special case that requires moral explanation.

https://doi.org/10.1017/iop.2026.10072 Published online by Cambridge University Press

An N of 1

My own training made this asymmetry legible. My perspective is not bias free, nor could it be. It is shaped by lived experience that exposes limitations in dominant I-O assumptions. I've noticed these gaps throughout my entire education and early career in the I-O psychology field. My father was a union Millwright and a single parent; union protections are not an abstract political topic to me. He depended on support from his union for occupational safety, income stability, and dignity after a heat stroke forced early retirement and later occupational illness. The union provided not only material support (e.g., food security, childcare assistance, and end-of-life protections) but also a buffer against classed exposure to risk that I-O models often treat as individual choice rather than structural constraint (e.g., when considering work–life integration). These experiences highlight a systematically undermodeled reality of working-class life in which health, safety, and economic security are negotiated rather than assumed, and one that remains largely invisible within mainstream I-O theory (Bergman & Jean, 2016; Kornhauser, 1965). I argue that this invisibility is not neutral, but rather a programmatic decision that narrowed what counted as "work psychology" and, by extension, what counted as professional concern for the field of I-O psychology, the professors who taught its pedagogy, and the practicioners who apply it to our modern organizations.

Concrete moves to make neutrality explicit

If neutrality is socially produced, then it can also be redesigned. The suggestions are practical and immediate:

1. **Curriculum as infrastructure**. Treat labor relations as foundational rather than niche. Build minimal competence into required coursework. Anchor this content in established applied-psychology frameworks that treat decent work and human rights as core outcomes, not optional values add-ons (Blustein et al., 2019). Integrate labor examples into standard topics (justice, voice, safety, job design) so unions appear as a normal object of inquiry, not a political detour.
2. **Training experiences and access**. Create practical, internships, and research partnerships that include unions, worker centers, and labor-management committees as field sites. Treat unions as organizations worth studying and supporting, including their internal change challenges (Martínez-Iñigo et al., 2012). If students only learn inside employer-controlled access channels, the field will continue to inherit employer-defined questions as the research agenda.
3. **Mentoring and professional signals**. Normalize labor-facing career paths by making them visible: conference programming, mentoring networks, and career panels that treat union work as legitimate applied practice. What is recognized publicly is what becomes thinkable privately.
4. **Professional policy and standards**. Make labor competence part of the field's formal infrastructure. Update education and training guidelines to explicitly include labor relations and union work as legitimate practice domains. Link this work to the profession's own "greater good" initiatives, including the UN Sustainable Development Goal of decent work (Blacksmith & Schmittzehe, 2023). Clear professional signals change what programs teach and what practitioners feel permitted to do.

These moves do not require the field to adopt a single political stance. They require the field to stop treating its current stance as value free. In a context where worker rights are formally recognized and unions demonstrably shape health and safety outcomes, treating labor as "out of scope" is itself a substantive position (United Nations, 1948; Vesper et al., 2025).

https://doi.org/10.1017/iop.2026.10072 Published online by Cambridge University Press

In labor–management relations, neutrality is a choice. Making that choice explicit is the first step toward a profession that can credibly claim it serves workers and society, not only organizations.

References

American Psychological Association (APA). (2017). *Ethical principles of psychologists and code of conduct* (2002, amended effective June 1, 2010, and January 1, 2017). https://www.apa.org/ethics/code

Baritz, L. (1960). *The servants of power: A history of the use of social science in American industry*. Wesleyan University Press. https://doi.org/10.1037/11283-000

Bergman, M. E., & Jean, V. A. (2016). Where have all the "workers" gone? A critical analysis of the unrepresentativeness of our samples relative to the labor market in the industrial–organizational psychology literature. *Industrial & Organizational Psychology*, **9**(1), 84–113. https://doi.org/10.1017/iop.2015.70

Blacksmith, N., & Schmittzehe, T. (2023). We can be more, but first, who are we? *Industrial & Organizational Psychology*, **16**(4), 520–523.

Blustein, D. L., Kenny, M. E., Di Fabio, A., & Guichard, J. (2019). Expanding the impact of the psychology of working: Engaging psychology in the struggle for decent work and human rights. *Journal of Career Assessment*, **27**(1), 3–28.

Bramel, D., & Friend, R. (1981). Hawthorne, the myth of the docile worker, and class bias in psychology. *American Psychologist*, **36**(8), 867–878. https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.36.8.867

Carriere, K. R. (2020). Workers' rights are human rights: Organizing the psychology of labor movements. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, **35**, 60–64.

Huszczo, G. E., Wiggins, J. G., & Currie, J. S. (1984). The relationship between psychology and organized labor: Past, present, and future. *American Psychologist*, **39**(4), 432–440.

Ilgen, D. R. (1990). Health issues at work: Opportunities for industrial/organizational psychology. *American Psychologist*, **45**(2), 273.

Kornhauser, A. (1947). Industrial psychology as management technique and as social science. *American Psychologist*, **2**(7), 224–229. https://doi.org/10.1037/h0055215

Kornhauser, A. (1965). *Mental health of the industrial worker: A Detroit study*. John Wiley.

Lefkowitz, J., Zickar, M. J., Cascio, W. F., & Kochan, T. (2026). I-O psychology and labor: Benign neglect, antipathy and missed opportunities. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology: Perspectives on Science and Practice*, **19**.

Logan, J. (2006). The union avoidance industry in the United States. *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, **44**(4), 651–675.https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8543.2006.00518.x

Lott, B. (2014). Social class Myopia: The case of psychology and labor unions. *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy*, **14**(1), 261–280.

Martínez-Iñigo, D., Crego, A., Garcia-Dauder, S., & Domínguez-Bilbao, R. (2012). Organizational culture as a source of change in trade unions. *Employee Relations*, **34**(4), 394–410.

Prilleltensky, I. (1990). On the social and political implications of cognitive psychology. *Journal of Mind and Behavior*, **11**(2), 127–136.

Quick, J. C. (1999). Occupational health psychology: Historical roots and future directions. *Health Psychology*, **18**(1), 82–88. https://doi.org/10.1037/0278-6133.18.1.82

Rosen, H., & Stagner, R. (1980). Industrial/organizational psychology and unions: A viable relationship? *Professional Psychology*, **11**(3), 477–483.

United Nations. (1948). Universal declaration of human rights. https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights.

Vesper, D., Zickar, M. J., O'Brien, L., O'Neill, R., Dollard, M. F., Flynn, K., Fletcher, K. A., Stephenson, K., Ahr, T., Jost, A., Somerville, K., & Barling, J. (2025). Occupational health and labor unions. *Occupational Health Science*, **9**, 835–864.

Zickar, M. J. (2001). Using personality inventories to identify thugs and agitators: Applied psychology's contribution to the war against labor. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, **59**(1), 149–164. https://doi.org/10.1006/jvbe.2000.1775

Zickar, M. J. (2004). An analysis of industrial-organizational psychology's indifference to labor unions in the United States. *Human Relations*, **57**(2), 145–167. https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726704042925

Cite this article: Bishop, L. (2026). Neutrality is a choice: How I-O psychology aligns with power. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology* **19**, 140–143. https://doi.org/10.1017/iop.2026.10072

https://doi.org/10.1017/iop.2026.10072 Published online by Cambridge University Press