
AN INTRODUCTION TO INDUSTRIAL-ORGANIZATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY & THE RESEARCH OF SANG EUN WOO

Interview by Emma K. McCoy
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What is Industrial-Organizational Psychology?

The official definition of Industrial-Organizational Psychology is “the study of human behaviors— feelings, thoughts, and actions— in the workplace using psychological principles and research methods.” Simply put, we work to understand how people think, feel, and behave at work. It is about helping all parties involved, from the organization as a whole to the individuals within. “Person-centric work psychology” has actually become a buzzword of sorts within our academic society as the worker perspective is often missing or overlooked. In response, psychologists like us in Purdue I-O are trying more so to hone in on the employee perspective.

What distinguishes it from other branches of psychology?

It distinguishes itself from other branches, such as cognitive, social, and developmental psychologies, because it encompasses fundamental elements of each of them and is therefore quite holistic. We, too, look at brain function in memory and information processing, social interactions and the influence of social dynamics, and human growth and development—just applied to the workplace.

Is Industrial-Organizational Psychology “applied psychology”?

It is often labeled as such— and there is an interesting tension between applied and basic science within the psychology realm— but I think that is a misconception. I-O is about more than just applying what we know about human psychology to the workplace, though that is one aspect. We are also generating new knowledge within our domain that tells us something about human psychology in general because people invest a significant portion of their lives in their jobs. It makes so much sense to study psychology in that context, not because it’s just applied science, but because it’s incredibly valuable to basic science as well.

What are your research concentrations?

I primarily study personality and individual differences, such as how we are made differently

from one another and how we can use that knowledge to help organizations and their workers. Within that broad concentration, I'm interested in topics such as changing jobs, people's relationships with work, the career side of their lives, etc. Openness is another pet theory of mine; I'm really interested in this personality construct because I think there is something to be said about the correlation between openness and maturity. I think being open means you are open to being corrected, and you are open to new experiences even when it's not comfortable. There is some distinct connection between openness as a personality and character virtues and maturity, so I want to study that within the umbrella of personality/individual differences.

Who benefits from I-O research?

Everyone!

How do you see your research as valuable/relevant to our communities, culture, and the world?

Openness is one example. I think it matters how you view certain events or situations to ensure that the resulting outcome is positive. For example, you can have multiple people experiencing the same exact situation that is objectively troubling, but they all react to the same situation or event in their own way as a function of their personality. So what can be said about understanding one another better as well as helping each other to be more in line with what society calls for, with what God calls us to be? With my focus on personality/individual differences and openness, that's what I want to send a message about to the world: Let's understand what it means to be open and what it means to be intellectually and relationally humble and take a more science-informed approach to how this works.

What is your research methodology?

I do a lot of surveys in a big data way. I want to gather data from participants while things are happening in real time, in the moment — not just administering one-off surveys. I do some qualitative analysis but am not an expert by any means, so I would like to learn more about it.

Most people associate psychology with applications to therapy and counseling; do you touch on this at all or do any consulting work?

Both clinical and I-O psychologists certainly have a heart for working with and serving other people, but I-O psychologists mainly deal with people within the "normal" range of personality and cognitive ability. When I do consulting, I work with business organizations who have HR issues. Consulting is meaningful for me because it gives me an idea of how science gets applied to real-life problem solving.

How did you personally get into I-O Psychology?

I was interested in psychology at a very young age. My parents thought I would make a

good psychologist starting in my elementary school years. I was just curious about how and why people think and feel in certain ways and was kind of a (naive) psychologist even then. I always knew I wanted to pursue it professionally someday. When I started applying to grad school programs in college, I had discussions with several people about specialized careers in psychology and was initially considering pursuing neuroscience because I was fascinated by it. However, I realized I was more of a big-brush painter, so to speak; I-O psychology is very big-picture in talking about how psychology can be applied to the whole spectrum of work-related phenomena, and I discovered how passionate I was about that.

What components of your job are you most passionate about?

Two things come to mind. It is very intellectually nourishing. I feel so joyful when I discover something and am able to generate some sort of argument or theory about how human minds work and the effects of it. It really excites me, the intellectual curiosity involved. The other piece is the relational aspect of academia. I tend to be very relational; most people are task-focused, but relationships really matter to me. Being a professor is a privilege because you get to walk alongside students and help them grow— not just academically and intellectually, but as people, and I love that about what I do.

What do you want others to understand about your work/field?

To sum it all up, we are psychologists before we are Industrial-Organizational psychologists.



SANG EUN WOO, PH.D.

*Associate Professor, Industrial-
Organizational Psychology
Purdue University*
