


COMMENTARY

## Earning our place: How we can use interdisciplinary collaborations to move forward with sustainable development goals

Gabriela Fernández-Castillo 

Department of Psychological Sciences, Rice University, Houston, TX, USA  
Email: [gfl6@rice.edu](mailto:gfl6@rice.edu)

Industrial psychologists know industrial psychologists. They appeal to us, they write to us, and they research and survey based on I-O methods. The discontent with the I-O field is not a new issue, with one of last year's focal articles also highlighting the gap between us and the real world (Rogelberg et al., 2022). One of the main takeaways from Mullins and Olson-Buchanan's (2023) focal article is that we should expand our thinking of what our field is capable of and how we can implement change but fail given our lack of influence. However, the way to gain recognition and voice in resolving humanitarian issues is not through increased collaboration with HR (though not offered as an end-all-be-all idea). It is through a redefining of how we educate students and who we work with that we can truly aim to make the world a better place. Aside from this, if we hope to expand into the study of the informal economy, we have no choice but to leave HR aside. We must look to the fields who have been working with these groups for decades, such as sociologists and anthropologists, and take a page (or many) from their books. This commentary seeks to highlight why we need interdisciplinary collaborations outside HR in order to study informal work, offering a case study of why we need to do so and a path forward for our field to take.

In order to illustrate why interdisciplinary collaborations would be beneficial in I-O's quest to study the informal economy and aid in humanitarian issues, a definition of informal work and its impact around the world is described. The informal economy can be defined as “[consisting] of activities that have market value but are not formally registered” (IMF, 2021). Furthermore, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) estimates that around 60% of the world is involved in some part of the informal sector (IMF, 2021). In the United States, estimates for participation in the informal economy currently lie around 40%, and in Mexico, informal workers make up around 50% of the working population (Alfaro & Correa, 2021; Bracha & Burke, 2014). By these numbers alone, it could be argued that failing to study informal work is a failure to understand what work is in these contexts. Taking Mexico as a case study, an example of a job role in the informal sector is paid domestic work, defined as “the activity in which labor is bought and sold for the tasks of daily reproduction in the domestic setting” (Rojas-García & González, 2017, p. 147). Domestic work employs 11% of Mexico's economically active women (Rojas-García & González, 2017). However, the industry has a complicated history and a consistent track record of abuse given the lack of legal recognition under the law and absence of legal contracts to workers. Workers in the field consider that their rights are not respected (Saldaña-Tejeda, 2014). This example highlights the imminent need for our involvement in the informal sector and how our abilities can help in the completion of sustainable development goals (SDG).

Goal 8 of the United Nations' SDG is to promote decent work for all, and one of the goal's targets is to “protect labor rights and promote safe and secure working environments for all

workers” (United Nations, 2023). We could contribute to this goal in this context with ideas like the following:

1. Complete a job analysis of the hired domestic work job role in the Mexican context in order to aid in the development of sample contracts. Then, these contracts could be brought to employers. This idea applies not only to hired domestic work but other informal labor jobs to help reduce work-related abuse.
2. Collect data of the job and document the perspective of these workers with a more narrative presentation, studying factors that affect employee retention, employee well-being, and more (using methods like narrative research, as described by Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002). This idea benefits hired domestic workers but also applies to other informal workers, such as American gig workers, who often turn to the informal economy as a way to earn extra income (Bracha & Burke, 2014).
3. Bring our evidence-based practices (cost-free) to nonprofit organizations (i.e., using team coaching as proposed by Hackman and Wageman, 2005; in order to help the organization complete team-based goals). One example is CACEH, who works to protect domestic workers in Mexico (CACEH, 2023).

However, with all three ideas our field runs into problems. How can we conduct a job analysis without knowledge of the legal, social, and economic context surrounding this job role? How can we study factors like employee retention in informal work whenever our field has consistently failed to make connections and build trust with these populations? Last, how can we bring our evidence-based practices to nonprofit organizations without the necessary social and political knowledge to do so? There is no doubt we can help: we have the theories, methods, tools, and interventions to move forward (with a few ideas mentioned here); we just have to expand our thinking, as HR is not the answer to our crisis (even if we wanted it to be).

As a graduate student, if I wanted to undertake a project where I studied domestic work in Mexico in order to improve employee well-being (or similar projects related to SDG goals), I would need to turn to other fields before doing so. The research cited above is external to our field, and yet, in I-O psychology programs, there is a consistent failure to reach outside our own (most of the time, the responsibility lies on the student). Therefore, to undertake a project where I would be able to speak about the issue, I would have to seek out collaborations with sociologists, anthropologists, economics, and political scientists to understand the context surrounding this type of work. The application of I-O theories and models would be meaningless if I fail to understand the complexity of domestic work in Mexico and incorporate this knowledge into my work and “evidence-based recommendations.” However, I-O psychology graduate programs are not designed for these types of collaborations or this type of thinking. Support structures exist to encourage students to delve into their interests, but a lack of infrastructure makes it hard to write about topics we want to explore and know nothing about. There is a responsibility on the part of graduate programs to make graduate students *thinkers*, and if we are to succeed in this task, we must be taught with a more diverse lens. I encourage I-O program coordinators to understand that our field is the study of work, and work does not solely exist in the office or in the United States. With this understanding, we should be inclined to teach and offer students courses on the context of work, such as the economy surrounding a particular industry or the social situation surrounding a particular job role—intentionally making connections with other departments in our universities. Perhaps we have such a hard time translating our findings into industry or the “real-world” because we tend to isolate our thinking: we need our feet on the ground, and we need to be willing to look to others to inform our research. This does not absolve the student of curiosity, intent, and hard work, but we need the help of our programs and our field to do so.

I believe courses that support interdisciplinary collaborations and thinking are necessary. I find it hard to believe I can write about work without speaking to its context. Moreover, I find it uncomfortable to do so, walking into a space I know nothing about and plastering my ideas over it. I-O psychologists cannot expect to walk in and help with issues such as the one discussed here. We must respect these communities and, furthermore, respect the fact that so far, we have failed to make the effort to study them. With this understanding, we can look to other fields for collaborations, as we can only translate *evidence-based practices* if we know the language in which we are writing. Regardless of the collaborations we undertake, if we are to enter these spaces respectfully, we must foster these partnerships and trust from the ground up. This can begin by helping students make connections with other fields when educating them, making interdisciplinary collaborations native to our thinking.

Interdisciplinary collaborations and thinking are already in our minds, an example being a past commentary who highlighted why I-O psychology should focus on government (Yost & Reeves, 2022). Furthermore, the Society of Industrial and Organizational (SIOP)'s Annual Conference in 2023 featured an Ignite session titled "Bridging Disciplinary Barriers: Interdisciplinary I-O Ignite" (SIOP, 2023). During this session, presenters identified "how I-O psychology can be strengthened by drawing from chronobiology, environmental psychology, criminology, Black studies, women and gender studies, and reproductive and sexual health" (SIOP, 2023). Presenters discussed how drawing from these fields could reinvigorate I-O and the issues we believe we are capable of solving. These authors represent what we know I-O can be, and research like theirs can help with a multitude of SDG goals, such as the goal of reduced inequalities or the goal of peace, justice, and strong institutions (United Nations, 2023).

A path forward needs to include a more interdisciplinary approach. Furthermore, our potential as a field does not simply lie in traditional methods. We can expand from traditional research methods such as surveys, and look at newspaper articles, interviews, and governmental reports in order to see if we can use any data already publicly available to make contributions. Examples include looking at journals external to our field, contextualizing our work with this knowledge. We could explore if existing tools can help relieve issues, or if we need to reinvent the wheel in order to do so.

Mullins and Olson-Buchanan bring up the indisputable fact that we are not doing enough as a field to help society move forward. However, the considerations in incorporating ourselves into the study of informal work and humanistic psychology are not small: We must do so guided by the colleagues who study the context of what we do. We must earn our place with the communities we have ignored for decades, beginning by fostering relationships with researchers who have taken the time and care to build such trust (which arguably, would be easier to do if students took their courses). Moreover, we must put aside our love of fanciful quantitative methods and think more broadly on how we can use *unconventional* methods to move SDG goals forward. Data on the informal economy are not clean cut, and they require creativity and intent to analyze: creativity we can learn through collaboration with others. The challenges with studying informal work are not insurmountable, and they must be addressed to keep our field relevant, but more importantly, to give back to those who need it most.

In this commentary, I discussed why collaborations with HR are not going to move us forward, and how we must keep thinking broadly and unconventionally to truly break the glass ceiling of studying informal work and incorporating SDG goals. We study work, and work is everywhere. However, how we study it, and how we go about it must be carefully thought out, and as a field, we must be willing to accept smaller sample sizes, more qualitative-heavy research, and more collaboration with other fields if we are to move forward with the propositions posed by Mullins and Olson-Buchanan. I have no doubt we can do so, but more importantly, that we should.

**Competing interests.** I have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

## References

- Alfaro, A. H., & Correa, G. A.** (2021). Labor informality during the pandemic: Crisis and recovery in Mexico. *Revista de Economía Mundial*, *60*, 173–195. <https://doi.org/10.33776/rem.v0i60.5527>
- Bracha, A., & Burke, M. A.** (2014). *Informal work in the United States: Evidence from survey responses*. Federal Reserve Bank of Boston. <https://www.bostonfed.org/publications/current-policy-perspectives/2014/informal-work-in-the-united-states-evidence-from-survey-responses.aspx>
- CACEH.** (2023). *Who are we*. National Center for Professional Training and Leadership of Domestic Workers. <https://caceh.org.mx/quienes-somos/>
- Hackman, J. R., & Wageman, R.** (2005). A theory of team coaching. *Academy of Management Review*, *30*, 269–287. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.2005.16387885>
- IMF.** (2021). *Five things to know about the informal economy*. IMF News. <https://rb.gy/r6c8k>
- Mullins, M., & Olson-Buchanan, J.** (2023). Moving boundaries on what I-O has been, and what I-O can be: The United Nations sustainable development goals as an organizing framework. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology*, *16*(4), 479–494.
- Ollerenshaw, J. A., & Creswell, J. W.** (2002). Narrative research: A comparison of two restoring data analysis approaches. *Qualitative Inquiry*, *8*(3), 329–347. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10778004008003008>
- Rogelberg, S., King, E. B., & Alonso, A.** (2022). How we can bring I-O psychology science and evidence-based practices to the public. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology*, *15*(2), 259–272. <https://doi.org/10.1017/iop.2021.142>
- Rojas-García, G., & González, M. P. T.** (2017). Paid domestic work: Gender and the informal economy in Mexico. *Latin American Perspectives*, *45*(1), 146–162. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0094582X17734545>
- Saldaña-Tejeda, A.** (2014). Tlazolteotl: “The Filth Deity” and the sexualization of paid domestic workers in Mexico. *Sexualities*, *17*(1), 194–212. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460713511110>
- Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology.** (2023). *2023 Annual Conference program search*. <https://www.siop.org/Annual-Conference/Attendee-Info/Program-Search>
- United Nations.** (2023). *Promote inclusive and sustainable economic growth, employment and decent work for all*. United Nations. <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/economic-growth/>
- Yost, P., & Reeves, K.** (2022). Bringing I-O psychology to the (re)public. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology*, *15*(2), 311–313. <https://doi.org/10.1017/iop.2022.19>

---

**Cite this article:** Fernández-Castillo, G. (2023). Earning our place: How we can use interdisciplinary collaborations to move forward with sustainable development goals. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology* *16*, 537–540. <https://doi.org/10.1017/iop.2023.63>