CONCEPTS AND DIRECTIONS
IN CRITICAL INDUSTRIAL/ORGANIZATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY
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MAIN CHAPTER TOPICS

• THE PSYCHOLOGY OF INDIVIDUALS IN AN ORGANIZATIONAL CONTEXT
  - Individual Differences at Work
  - Motivation
  - Leadership

• INSIDE THE ORGANIZATION: HUMAN RESOURCE TECHNOLOGIES
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• IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS
From its inception, critical theory has attempted to uncover the ideological underpinnings of everyday actions, beliefs, and interpersonal relations. Horkheimer (1982), a key figure in the Frankfurt School of critical theory, framed this objective as one of liberating human beings from often taken-for-granted social and economic conditions that shape their understandings of who they are and of what they are capable. Thus, from the beginning, critical theory in the social sciences has involved examining the interface between human understanding and the social and economic systems that frame and limit human possibilities.

Stated as such, it would seem that industrial/organizational (IO) psychology should be a natural home for critical theory. IO psychology is commonly defined as the study of human behavior within organizational systems (e.g. Katz and Kahn, 1978), and has held that the multilevel nature of its constructs requires theorizing between levels of analysis (e.g., House et al., 1995). One would thus expect that the analysis of the socio-economic context which frames and conditions human beings’ lives, and which, to use Horkheimer’s vivid language, forms the “circumstances that enslave them” (1982: 244), would be a central topic of study in this area of psychology.

To date, however, critical perspectives have remained on the periphery of IO psychology (Islam and Zyphur, 2006). While related areas such as Organization Studies (e.g., Alvesson and Deetz, 1996) and Industrial and Labor Relations (e.g., Edwards, 1992) maintain strong traditions in critical studies as well as quantitative empirical work, the IO literature has remained firmly tied to experimental and quantitative roots. Although this does not necessarily exclude a critical approach, a uniquely quantitative approach tends to take for granted pre-existing facts rather than unpack the social relations which led to the establishment of certain orders as facts. As an “applied” science, IO psychology has tended to employ a “scientist-practitioner model” (e.g., Hayes et al., 1987) in which
scientific research is used to further existing managerial goals and add utility to current managerial procedures, rather than call into question these goals and question managerial capitalism as such (Baritz, 1974). One way to undo a managerial bias, we argue, is to question the politics inherent in the very categories used by IO psychologists.

This combination of a plethora of fertile areas of inquiry and the lack of a firmly established and critical program of research in the center of the discipline should be enticing to current and future IO psychology scholars. This chapter is an attempt to demonstrate the potential for critical work throughout the major subfields of IO psychology. While it is impossible to tackle all the areas within the discipline, we have chosen some of the key topics found in most IO textbooks and syllabi, and contrast existing perspectives in current work with future possibilities using a critical perspective. The chapter is structured as follows: First, we examine individual-level IO psychological theory involving individual differences such as cognitive ability, motivation, personality and attitudes, contrasting traditional perspectives with current and potential critical contributions. Next, we address the power implications of key human resources technologies developed and used by IO psychologists, suggesting implications for critical theories of technology and social control. Finally, we examine work-life balance issues, focusing on “macro” ramifications of psychological theories of the workplace, such as stress and public health, governance, and the changing nature of work. Given the wide purview of this coverage, this review is meant to whet the appetite of IO researchers rather than provide a comprehensive discussion of critical perspectives as applied to IO psychology. As stated above, there is much room for new and interesting debate in this emerging field.

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF INDIVIDUALS IN AN ORGANIZATIONAL CONTEXT
Individual Differences at Work

The study of stable individual differences in IO psychology has been largely based in the attempt to create effective selection systems (e.g., Anderson, 2005) as well as to understand the role of such differences in behavior at work, such as job performance (e.g., Weiss and Kurek, 2003) or team behavior (e.g., Stewart, 2003). The first and prototypical example of the study of stable individual differences in work settings concerns the century-old study of intelligence or “general mental ability” at work (e.g., Thorndike, 1986), but research has also proliferated regarding the roles of stable personality in predicting applied work outcomes such as job performance (e.g., McCrae and John, 1992). These literatures, while not denying change and social influences in affecting individual characteristics (cf., Roberts et al., 2006), tend to underplay change and treat change as an intrinsic development of pre-existing potentials (e.g., Costa and MacCrae, 2006). In addition, traditionally, the study of individual differences has tended to emphasize genetic inheritance (e.g., Loehlin, 1992; Jensen and Johnson, 1994) and downplay the role of culture, seeing individual cognitive and personality as “universalizable,” if not universal in a more objective sense (e.g., McCrae and Costa, 1997).

Such perspectives are anathema to critical views, which tend to focus on subjective potentials rather than the psychological “individual differences.” What distinguishes potentials from individual differences is that the former do not simply involve observable individual variables. Rather, they refer to a line of thought where an agentic human subject grasps at objects in the world through perception and action, and is actively involved in finding his or her own identity. Rather than attempting to pin down the universal features of this subject, which is always essentially undefined but in search for self-definition (e.g. Wittgenstein, 1961), this line of thought defines individuals not
by their z-scores on given variables but in the projects and struggles they set for themselves within a given social context. In the words of Foucault, “What I wanted to try to show was how the subject constituted itself, in one specific form or another… in each case one plays, one establishes a different relation to oneself” (1984: 290). As such, the self is always embedded in a specific, grounded context, but also always reaches beyond that context in the search for itself. A critical view, thus, compared to traditional IO psychology, leaves much more openness in the notion of the individual, which is dynamic and projective, but also locates more explanatory value in social and cultural situations, since it is only through social contexts that the self finds the institutional moorings it needs to ground its projects.

**Motivation**

If the mainstream IO view of the structure of human psychology is essentialistic, its view of human motivation is largely utilitarian. That is, human beings, according to traditional IO models, are driven to achieve certain ends in order to satisfy personal demands (cf., Salancik and Pfeffer, 1977). In classic models of motivation, these demands may be extrinsic, as in money or benefits (see Komaki, 1986) or intrinsic, in terms of social value (see Tyler et al., 1996), power and achievement (McClelland and Boyatzis, 1982), or more “existential” demands such as growth (Alderfer, 1969) or self-actualization (Maslow, 1943). In many ways, IO psychology has provided a counterpoint to economistic views of human behavior by showing that the diversity of human motives escapes a purely monetaristic view. However, the traditional IO psychology view is not incompatible with the classical economic view of human beings in that people strive after goals in order to satisfy their personal utility functions (see Schwartz, 1986), an essentially economic vision of human beings.
What changes in the psychological version is the diversification of objects of utility of social and psychological needs and desires, not the basic view of people as utility calculators.

The more starkly economistic variants of IO motivation theory, such as goal setting (e.g., Locke and Latham, 1990), expectancy theory (e.g., Vroom, 1964) or behavior modification (Komaki, 1986), are the easiest to submit to a critical approach, because they view human motivation in simple means-ends terms that might be as much the outcome of socialization into an economistic view than the proof of the validity of this view (e.g., Ferraro and Pfeffer, 2005), that is, people may learn their means-ends mentalities from the theories themselves. An ideological critique of such approaches would, at a minimum, point to their framing of human nature in ways that conveniently fit into a modern consumer capitalist system, and leave out human potentials which might not be realizable in such a system.

While more humanistic variants of motivational models attempt to capture a richer picture of human motivation through concepts such as self-actualization, the basic picture of utilities as something that an individual has obscures a richer picture of human action as establishing who one is (Fromm, 1976). To place self-actualization as a need in a hierarchy of other needs (Maslow, 1943) is to turn self-actualization into a utility among others, drawing critiques from critical theorists that the pyramid of needs looks more like a pyramid of post-war American values (Cook, 2005). Thus, rather than conceptualize self-actualization as a drive or a need of the self, a critical perspective might attempt to break free of such a utilitarian anchor and view growth needs as possibilities for radical self-transcendence.
Leadership

Although the academic literature on leadership is increasingly varied and multidisciplinary, much of mainstream thought on leadership still relies on the concept of a leader as a singular, charismatic, and courageous individual who emerges at the head of an organization through personal merit and enterprise (Meindl et al., 1985). Contemporaneous to and following Meindl et al.’s well-known exploration of the “romantic” conception of leadership as an important organizational sense-making process, and similar treatments exploring the primarily symbolic function of leadership (e.g., Pfeffer, 1981), many studies have moved away from only looking at the individual leader, also examining, for example, leader-subordinate relationships (e.g., Graen and Scandura, 1987) and follower cognitive processes (e.g. Lord and Maher, 1991).

These works have theoretically decentered the leader as the locus for understanding leadership, but have rarely directly called into question the entrenched system-reinforcing powers inherent in the modern concept of leadership in general (Meindl et al, 1985). For example, in a historical exploration of leadership, Pears (1992) traced the roots of the individualistic notion of the great leader to 19th century Europe, where this picture of leadership allowed the ruling elite to maintain power in the newly consolidating European states and avoid popular revolution. Trait-based conceptions of leadership provide an ideological buttress to dominant power systems by giving the impression to organizational members that they are less competent to make decisions, that if they contributed more to the organization then they might achieve upward mobility, and that all important successes of the organization are attributable to power-holders (Haslam et al., 2001). As such, a critical perspective would start from Haslam et al.’s observation, and attempt to explore how beliefs
about leadership contribute to a psychology of subordination, while on the other hand providing important meaning-giving resources for organizational members (Pfeffer, 1981).

**INSIDE THE ORGANIZATION: HUMAN RESOURCES TECHNOLOGIES**

In the section above, we dealt with issues in IO focused around individuals. Since critical theories view individuals as embedded in social contexts marked by unequal power relations, and maintain that human liberation requires an analysis of these relations, a major criticism of individualistic perspectives is their neglect of such expositions. With regards to IO treatments of human resources technologies, which occur at the collective level of the organization, the key critique shifts from ignoring contextual factors to misframing the social effects of these techniques. While personnel psychology purports to be about administrative efficiency, critical perspectives would attempt to unearth where power relations and elite interests lie behind claims to efficiency.

**Job Analysis**

Job analysis was developed from scientific management principles to systematically divide and organize job-related behaviors in organizations (Harvey, 1991). It consists of defining performance behaviors, required knowledge, skills, and abilities, and eventually job categories to best meet productivity needs. The control of job characteristics extends even to the physical movements of workers when, for example, jobs are broken down into their requisite physical movements. As such, in minutely analyzed tasks, each worker movement may be considered an administrative target. At the organizational level, job categories often form the basis of departmental divisions that structure communication and can create distinctive departmental cultures.
Townley (1991) describes Human Resource Management techniques such as job analysis according to a Foucaultian view (e.g., Foucault, 1977), such that the technical-scientific process of “partitioning” takes place where managers identify a sphere of analysis and break up this sphere into relevant units to arrange and rearrange. From a Foucaultian perspective, power is not simply a coercive force, but lies in the ability to impose definitions and modes of interpretation on situations people use to structure their lives. In this view, job analysis gains its power from its ability to pre-define people’s actions from morning to evening each day of their careers.

Relatedly, many jobs at the upper echelons of organizations are difficult to submit to strict scientific management principles such as job analysis. This is because top management performance is notoriously difficult to define or measure (see Longenecker and Gioia, 1992). Thus, the very control systems justified by efficiency rather than social control are most frequently employed in particularly those segments of the organization marked by low power rather than those leadership positions which presumably are the drivers of firm success. Such an observation may reinforce the view that job analytic techniques are often used to maintain power as much as ensure firm effectiveness.

Alternatives to the strict delimitation of job aspects have appeared in the literature, including job revision (Wrzesniewski and Dutton, 2001), task revision (Staw and Boettger, 1990) and role innovation (Van Maanen and Schein, 1979). Such treatments involve participation by employees in remaking their jobs and cite worker needs for control and intrinsic motivation as key factors. In line with this stream of research, critical theory could be employed in exploring the political as well as the operational implications of such a reworking. This added dimension might explain why such
programs have been slow to take off in the marketplace, or demonstrate the conditions under which such programs could be used by employees seeking empowerment.

Selection and Recruitment

If job analysis techniques are essentially geared toward providing stability and order within a hierarchical system by imposing definitions on tasks and occupational categories, selection procedures complement this process by matching these categories with potential actors in the job market, searching for an ideal “fit” (Chatman, 1991) between organizational culture and individual traits. This process not only assumes but depends inherently on the idea that individuals are “observable, measurable and quantifiable” (Townley, 1993: 529). The above described picture of human nature lends itself easily to organizational selection processes. In fact, the history of the study of individual differences and that of selection procedures are highly interdependent, with early intelligence testing, for example, being used in immigration control (Richardson, 2003) and university admissions (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). The racial and ethnic discrimination that accompanied early selection initiatives is well-documented (see Sternberg, 2005). However, at a deeper level, the view of human nature as individual difference variables itself has an ideological patina, a theoretical choice understandable only in the light of the social structures to which such knowledge was and still is applied.

With regards to group bias in testing, it is certainly true that IO psychology has produced many studies attempting to counter inequality in the workplace through improving selection tests and increasing non-discriminatory selection criteria (e.g. Maxwell and Arvey, 1993). In addition, many studies have attempted to show benefits of diversity on individual and team functioning (e.g.,
Dovidio et al., 1998) — although diversity is often shown to have a deleterious impact on such outcomes (e.g., Tsui and O’Reilly, 1989). Such research claims a progressive political agenda in attempting to undo negative effects of gender, racial, and other group-based prejudice in selection contexts. However, similar to the literatures described above on job redesign, rethinking individualistic leadership, non-monetary motivation, and change in individual differences, such studies do not question the basic structure of managerial ideology in the workplace, but rather work to mitigate the social harms brought about given the status quo system of work employment. In the selection context, studies questioning the validity of selection tests seldom question the notion of management-based selection as a method of social organizing or draw out the political ramifications of this nearly ubiquitous practice.

Following Townley (1993), selection systems follow closely the Foucaultian “ranking” function that is comprised of the evaluation, testing, and placement within a hierarchy of people within the managerial purview. Managerial control is in large measure based on these hierarchies, and although such control is not specifically spelled out in the “objective” selection test procedures, this very objectivity is what justifies managerial authority, as it provides a gloss of disinterestedness that hides power interests. Thus, debates about the content, construct, and predictive validity of selection measures hide the fact that observation and quantification themselves — explicitly aimed at judging and ranking people as qualified or disqualified for resource linked social roles — are elements taken for granted in organizational life.

**Training and Socialization**
In a way, the training and socialization literatures form a counterpoint to selection and individual differences approaches, in that they do not take individuals to be relatively stable entities to be selected for or against, but rather acknowledge the malleability of organizationally-relevant aspects of human beings. The training and socialization literatures are joined together here because both involve the changing of individuals’ attitudes, beliefs, values, or behaviors in order to bring these in alignment with organizational norms, demands and/or culture (e.g., Kolb and Frey, 1975). In the socialization literature, the focus tends to be on the automatic social processes that bring newcomers into alignment with the organization, usually early in their tenure (Chatman 1991), through norms, rituals, stories, and other informal mechanisms (Trice and Beyer, 1984). The training literature, on the other hand, tends to focus on specific formalized procedures used to change employee cognition and behavior (Arthur et al., 2003).

While both literatures focus on change in individuals based on social contextual variables, they do so in quite different ways. For example, the training literature tends to use more of an educational model (see Huddock, 1994), focusing on processes of individual cognitive change rather than the content that organizational members learn (e.g., Bandura, 1986; Salas and Cannon-Bowers, 2002). Thus, outcomes in the training literature take the form of memory and retention and application of learned material (e.g., Hacker, 2003; Kolb and Frey, 1975). On the other hand, the socialization literature tends to be more self-conscious about the links between training and ideology, emphasizing much more often the negative influences of acculturation in terms of legitimizing unethical behavior in organizations (e.g., Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999), alienation and rejection of external groups by the organization (e.g., Pratt, 2000), and socialization into cultures of brutality or violence (e.g., Van Maanan, 1973).
Perhaps the difference in focus between training and socialization literatures may be explained by the tendency of socialization researchers to take a dynamic, interdisciplinary view of culture, mixing psychological theories of cognitive change with an anthropological sensitivity to social systems as wholes (Schein, 2006). In contrast, the training literature tends to draw more on individual-level educational psychology theory (e.g., Bandura, 1986) rather than look critically on the training systems themselves as parts of social systems. This interdisciplinary tendency in organizational socialization aligns it much more closely with critical theory, which integrates macro-level political perspectives, interpersonal, meso-level communicative practices, and individual psychological tendencies (e.g., Marcuse, 1964; Fromm, 1976).

OUTSIDE THE ORGANIZATION: WORK-ENVIRONMENT ISSUES

A critical overview of the discipline would be incomplete without a treatment of the growing importance of work-environment issues. The emergence of such interest has grown from the recognition that business practices do not exist in an entirely separate sphere from other life spaces, but are highly influential in the way that, among others, familial, cultural, political, and environmental institutions are affected by the meanings of work and the terms under which people labor (e.g., Ciulla, 2000). To give a flavor of how critical theory can inform further discussions about the interface of work and society, we review a small sampling of the social spheres affected by the terms and understandings of labor.

Organizational Stress
The notion of stress is to some extent a quintessential case of a dense work-society mixture with multiple nuanced facets. On the one hand, stress is often treated as a medical condition and treated in terms of its negative biological effects, such as increased risk of heart disease and lowered immunity (e.g., Cooper and Marshall, 1976). However, stress is also often analyzed in terms of individual cognitions and emotions (e.g., Bhagat, 1983), thus creating an interface between biological and psychological theory. Simultaneously, stressful working conditions are also examined as precursors of experienced stress, adding a public health/occupational safety dimension to the mix (e.g., Parker and DeCotiis, 1983). Finally, some recent treatments of stress have highlighted the socio-cultural aspects of stress as a discourse (Barley and Knight, 1992, Meyerson, 1994), an addition which greatly increases the potential for studying stress under a critical lens.

Prior to Barley and Knight’s (1992) discussion of stress as a social symbol, there was a dominant tendency to treat the stress phenomenon using a “medical model.” According to this model, stress could be discussed as a disease, whose etiological factors fell into one of two categories, (a) environmental stressors such as workload, family problems, or economic distress, and (b) personal dispositional factors, such as personality traits, attitudes and values. The interaction of personal proclivities with environmental factors gave rise to the “presence” of stress, with its concomitant social, psychological, and biological effects.

The “critical turn” in the early 90’s (e.g., Barley and Knight, 1992, Meyerson, 1994) challenged this view by treating stress not as an objective disease that appears or disappears given the right conditions, but as a “dominant cultural metaphor” that can be used to encode various cultural contradictions. While in the disease model culture still entered the picture, it did so only as a cause of individual beliefs and attitudes, or because it structured the environment in stress-producing ways;
in other words, culture existed as a cause of stress, but stress was not itself cultural. By contrast, in
Barley and Knight’s view, the use of the stress concept enabled the expression of various cultural
tensions, such as that of the relation between individual utility and organizational performance and
the relation between the mind and the body. Playing the stress card offered a justification for
individuals requesting organizational resources and offered an avenue for legitimate escape, as
disease is considered a justifiable external cause for poor performance. On the other hand,
medicalizing stress allowed organizations to implement “stress management programs,” implicitly
transferring responsibility onto the worker for managing his/her own stress and avoiding radical
system change. It should be clear how this type of analysis is fundamentally different from an
analysis which seeks to measure and reduce stress-related problems at work. The latter approach
takes for granted a certain problem, and attempts to solve it, while the former seeks to explain the
discursive construction of the problem in the first place, and relies much more on historical and
interpretive paradigms.

The Changing Nature of Careers

While a critical approach to stress focuses more on the construction of individual experience, the
study of careers takes as its focus more macro institutions such as the nature of occupations. In some
cases, such as academic careers (e.g., Meyer et al., 2006), these institutions may be thousands of
years old, whereas in other cases, such as project managers or software developers, they may be
nascent or transitory categories. The traditional approach to the psychological study of careers is a
type of matching exercise between pre-set occupational categories and individual profiles; tests,
interviews, and other psychometric tools are used to ensure that people follow career paths that “fit”
their sets of knowledge, skills and abilities in order to improve both their personal well-being and
their performance at work (e.g., Kristoff, 1996). In our view, critical perspectives can inform this traditional view on two important and related fronts.

First, rather than viewing career trajectories as existing “natural” categories in which people have varying aptitudes, a critical perspective would attempt to unpack systems of power and ideology underlying these trajectories. As discussed above, views of the human being that are based in typological profiles undercut the sense of human freedom and agency that is critical to a liberated view of human beings; in a parallel fashion, views of occupations as stable categories overlook potentials for social change and reify existing social structures (e.g., Lukacs, 1923). Rather than viewing careers as taken-for-granted categories, a critical IO psychology would view career categories as reflective of who gets to define what work is to be done and to impose methods of ensuring newcomers are socialized into these definitions. Such perspectives with regards to the making of doctors (e.g., Islam and Zyphur, 2007), executives (e.g., Ferraro et al., 2005) and public workers (e.g., Van Mannen, 1979), among others, have demonstrated that the establishment of career role identities is fraught with hard socialization and “strong” situations (Mitchell, 1974), i.e. those that impose social structures through training and occupational norms.

Second, a more prolific literature has examined society-level changes in the structure of work relationships, reflecting widespread concerns about fundamental changes in the way people work (e.g., Howard, 1995). Several parallel phenomena are worth noting here: changes in work relationships based on technological developments in the workplace (e.g., Griffith and Neale, 2001), increases in the variety of careers over the lifespan and shortening times spent in careers (e.g., Mainiero and Sullivan, 2006), the globalization of markets and concomitant issues of off-shoring labor (cf., Harrison and MacMillan, 2006), child labor (e.g., Cigno et al., 2001), and diminishing
power of local labor organizers (Goldfield, 1987), and the “flexibilization” of labor and the increase in spot contracts and part-time work among adults (e.g., Askenazy, 2004). All have led to a difficulty in using traditional career categories to describe the world of work. In all these phenomena, critical scholars should be paying attention to how career categories are remade by powerful actors and how local workers react to a new and confusing workplace.

**Organization and Culture**

Although organizational culture (and culture in general [see Kroeber and Kluckhorn, 1952]) has long groped for a consensus in definition, a general way to describe the phenomenon would be as a set of basic assumptions about roles and practices that develops in an organization, is taught to new members, and influences how people think, feel, and behave with regards to organizationally relevant issues (Schein, 1990). The organizational culture literature is varied and interdisciplinary (Schein, 2006); however, it is worth noting that this literature became increasingly popular in the late 1970’s and 1980’s, when culture theorists attempted to explain the high efficiency of Japanese management as a consequence of “cultural” factors that led to increased worker productivity (e.g., Ouichi, 1981). The use of culture as an explanation for efficiency and its subsequent treatment as a management technique has led to criticisms that the management literature pulled anthropological and sociological facets of cultural studies out of context, and inappropriately used the concept of culture in a purely functional sense (e.g., Meek, 1988).

The ways in which organizational culture would appropriately use critical theory to further its already interdisciplinary views on practices and belief structures could be divided into two broad levels of analysis. The first would look within the organization’s culture, and would take the form of
a micro-analysis of organizational politics and symbolic actions (e.g., Pfeffer, 1981). The second would be to link organizational culture with wider cultural dynamics, attempting to map the relationships between ideologies and practices originating in organizational cultures and those prevalent in society at large, in order to formulate a cultural theory of organization, and explain the cultural functions of organizations in terms beyond mere efficiency explanations.

The first of these two approaches has been described as a microsociological approach (e.g., Goffman, 1983), and most often has drawn on interpretive anthropology and ethnography (e.g., Geertz, 1973) ethnomethodology (e.g., Garfinkel, 1967), and micro-analyses of events such as rituals (e.g., Trice and Beyer, 1984) or speech acts (e.g., Austin, 1962). Based on the above perspectives, the researcher would begin at the level of everyday practices, routines or habits, and attempt to infer “hidden meanings” that reveal organizational ideologies. From there, the critical scholar could attempt to demonstrate how these ideologies reinforce elite power structures or maintain a hegemonic status quo, or else demonstrate spaces in everyday practices where resistance to such structures occurs.

The second, macro approach would look at larger institutions, such as managerialism, organizational forms or relationships between national and organizational cultures. For example, a critical culture study at this level might examine where organizational cultures reflect and reinforce national level cultural beliefs or values or where organizational cultures might signal a challenge to dominant country-level social structures (cf., Bucheli, 2006; Grieder, 1997). In this case, organizational culture would be thought of as a mode of being that competes with others for expression in a social space, and individual workers’ socialization into a particular organizational culture might be thought of as a
political conversion into a specific clan. Venturing into institutional levels of analysis could provide alternate explanations of norms and selection systems from a social standpoint.

**IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

In contrasting mainstream IO psychological views with critical alternatives, it is important to note that we have provided a necessarily broad and caricatured view of mainstream IO psychology. In reality, IO psychologists often temper their views with considerations of socio-economic context and are aware of the ideological undergirding of the theories they use. Conversely, critical theorists often fall victim to many of the mainstream presuppositions that they attempt to problematize. What are provided here, then, are prototypes of the mainstream and critical views, the function of which is to highlight major points of distinction between the two approaches.

Complicating the situation, the “industrial” side of IO is often discussed separately from the “organizational,” where the former regards more personnel-related topics such as selection and testing, and the latter, more “humanistic” topics such as motivation and attitudes. In this case, the current critique regards the former side more than the latter, although several points are applicable to both. Further complicating the picture still, the field of Organizational Studies, which is distinct from, but in many ways parallel to, IO psychology, has a rich and growing critical and post-modern tradition that encapsulates some of the points made here, but has been more strongly represented in business schools and in sociology departments than in IO psychology departments. Thus, even separating out IO psychology as an independent field of study involves some premises that are difficult to hold. It may be, for example, that IO psychology has been able to focus on quantitative, psychometric approaches at the expense of critical theory precisely because other related fields have
more thoroughly explored critical alternatives — allowing critical studies in allied fields to serve a kind of relief-valve function for any critical motives within IO psychology itself. If this is the case, then critiquing mainstream IO approaches may be somewhat misplaced.

To a large extent, promoting a critical IO psychology is not a call for a radically changed set of objects of study. We believe that critical theory is more of a posture taken with respect to the object of study [than???] a specific set of variables under study.. To some extent, this involves an awareness of how the results of one’s study are to be used in a social context. Will a certain theory of intelligence be used against marginalized groups? Will motivational techniques be used to exploit workers? Whatever the answer to such questions, it is important to note that the critical posture goes beyond simple usage of empirical data, and asks why certain things are studied in the first place, whose idea it was to study such things, and what individual and social interests may have been secured or compromised through such a study. For example, in a criticism of the use of IQ testing to establish racial differences, Sternberg states, “Deciding to show that one group is genetically inferior on an index is a value judgment as to what is worth showing. These decisions, among others, indicate that there is no value-free science. Few of us can hear our own accents when we speak—only other people have accents!” (2005: 295). Although Robert Sternberg is a mainstream psychologist normally not associated with the critical theory paradigm, the critical recognition to what psychologist are doing, and why we are doing it, is clear from such statements. Thus, promoting critical IO psychology can take place through a sensitizing of scholars to the effects of their work, and does not require that IO psychologists immerse themselves in 19th century German or postmodern philosophy.
That said, an important point to be stressed is that while critical theory entails a multi-level approach, integrating cultural, political, interpersonal, and psychological phenomena into a holistic worldview, simply bringing social effects into the picture as *variables* — for example as a moderator or boundary condition — is not sufficient to do justice to the critical view. In many of the cases cited above, researchers (rightly) brought social context into their discussion of psychological effects, without taking on a critical viewpoint. For example, intelligence researchers have searched for bias in testing conditions, motivational researchers have stressed the role of social values in creating utilities, leadership researchers have studied followership, stress researchers have looked at context in the etiology of stress, and many other examples of examining context are readily available. However, looking at context in this way misses a fundamental point stressed by critical theory. For instance, a critical theorist might not stop at asking how culture affects peoples’ preferences, but rather might look at how the notions of motivation and preference in the first place help make sense of the world, and at the same time, hold in place institutional structures. So, for example, a stress researcher that studies how harsh labor conditions augment stress might be doing important research, but is not really critical in orientation because nothing essential is being problematized. Barley and Knight’s (1992) theory of stress, however, could be considered critical, because it doesn’t take for granted the object under study, but asks how such an object is constituted within a social-discursive nexus.

As a final note, we stress that we are not suggesting critical scholarship replace quantitatively oriented, “objective” science, a worry that some organizational psychologists have voiced when viewing this peripheral scholarship from the center of mainstream organization studies (e.g., Donaldson, 1992; Locke, 2002). While some scholars feel that analyzing the social construction of commonly held ideas, particularly intimate psychological constructs such as selves, emotions, or
values, can cause scholars to lose their grounding and fall into academic nihilism (e.g., Crosby, 1988), we feel that the danger is greater for scholars not to examine the social premises and origins of their theories and applications. While the promotion of self-reflection can cause vertigo, it also provides a basis for the scholarly quest for evermore coherent discourses (Habermas, 1981). While such discourses may not provide the bedrock of absolute truth that some scholars unrealistically demand (e.g., Locke, 2002), there is no indication that ignoring self-criticism can do any better, although such a posture certainly increases subjective certainty. If scientific progress depends on the right mix of humility, perspicacity, and drive, then we believe that no better recipe for such a mix is at present available than the cycle of disciplinary self-questioning that defines critical studies in the social sciences, and has the potential to define an emerging field of critical IO psychology.

**MAIN CHAPTER POINTS**

- Often, mainstream IO Psychology builds theory around unspoken managerial assumptions about human behavior and social order.
- Critical approaches analyze psychological theory and workplace techniques from the point of view of power dynamics and ideologies.
- At the level of individuals, mainstream approaches see persons in terms of objective traits, whereas critical approaches view people in terms of subjective potentials.
- At the level of human resources techniques, mainstream approaches view such techniques as pragmatic, whereas critical approaches view these techniques as power-reinforcing.
- Critical perspectives on work-environment issues question social categories such as careers, work related stress, and organizational culture, reframing these categories as power-relevant.
GLOSSARY

• Ideology – a collection of organized ideas. In critical theory, refers to where ideas are used to further particular social or economic orders.

• Individual differences – any variable (e.g. psychological, demographic) on which people differ from one another.

• Microsociology – study of social structure in terms of patterns of interactions between individuals, often in small groups.

• Self-actualization – In humanistic psychology, the process by which people realize their potentials for full selfhood.

• Subject – In the context of critical theory, refers to thinking and acting agents, with a particularistic points of view and life projects.

READING SUGGESTIONS

Alvesson and Deetz (1996) offer a good introduction to critical perspectives applied to organizational settings. Barley and Knight (1992) show how occupational stress entered workplace discourse and became a dominant cultural trope among organizational thinkers. Pratt’s (2000) study of identification among Amway workers shows how organizational identity is manipulated to fit managerial objectives, and the sometimes negative results of organizational socialization on
members’ well being. Pfeffer’s (1981) treatment of management as a symbolic activity is an overview of the ways in which socially shared symbolic meanings are politically leveraged by managers. Finally, Townsley’s (1993) review of Foucault in the HR literature provides a link between this key thinker and practices of organizational selection and surveillance.

INTERNET RESOURCES

- European Group for Organizational Studies, - www.egosnet.org/index.shtml
- Ephemera Journal - www.ephemeraweb.org

QUESTIONS

• What are the main assumptions about human nature that managers hold? Under what circumstances should these assumptions be questioned or challenged?
• Are acts of defining job roles politically neutral, or are they necessarily based on ideological premises? Are some managerial actions more political than others, and if so, which ones?
• Should organizations concerned with the bottom line take into account worker well-being even where well-being is not linked to profits? If so, are such concerns sustainable in a competitive marketplace?

REFERENCES


