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# Commentary Organizational Psychology and poverty reduction: where supply meets demand†

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**Summary** Developing a globally responsive Science-Practitioner-*Humanist* model (Lefkowitz, 2008) means articulating professional values (supply) and meeting global demand. The United Nations' Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) seek to halve human poverty by 2015 and how organizations respond to this constitutes a formidable demand on Organizational Psychology. A key *process* for delivering more effective aid is the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness, which seeks collaborative contributions from a plethora of Organizations, including business organizations and professions like ours. We argue that a thoughtful articulation of what Organizational Psychology uniquely stands for, and can offer, is therefore needed. It is proposed that a key *mechanism* for addressing this challenge is a Task Force, whose functions will include the coordination of institutions within psychology, and linking them to those in development. We describe such a task force and outline its core mission (Reichman, Frese, Schein, Carr, MacLachlan, & Landy, 2008). Organizational Psychology's response to poverty reduction should meet Lefkowitz's criteria for developing a more humanist model of science and practice as the MDGs are inherently humanist and values-based. Copyright © 2008 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

## Introduction

Lefkowitz (2008) has written a cogent and timely reminder to Organizational Psychology. Its essence can be couched in terms of organizational learning (Argyris, 1990; Senge, 1992). There is a discrepancy between the ethical values we aspire to uphold, and a set of values, primarily corporate/commercial, that the profession on a quotidian basis serves (Lefkowitz, 2008, p. 440). Running against

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the moral grain of what first draws people into Psychology as a career, practice is "deficient in its. . .failure to represent the interests of individuals and the common good [and] contaminated by. . .the traditional economic free-enterprise, shareholder-above-all-else agenda" (2008, p. 441, parenthesis added). Such contradictions and dilemmas have been outlined before (Baritz, 1960; Brief, 2000). Differentiating Lefkowitz's (2008) critique however is its vision of a Science-Practitioner-Humanist model that fits a contemporary global landscape. Features in the landscape include a worldwide casualization of work (2008, p. 445), a rise of "Corporate Social Responsibility," stakeholder models for organizational functioning, and the inter-related humanistic concerns of climate change; and human poverty (ibid, p. 450).

Human poverty is our point of departure from Lefkowitz's (2008) paper. In Lefkowitz (2008), values are figure to poverty's ground. We reverse the emphasis, foregrounding poverty itself. In respect to global poverty, we use concepts from theory in vocational fit: professional values are features of "supply" rather than "demand" (Maynard, Joseph, & Maynard, 2006). We choose to foreground (1) *demand*, specifically for work in reducing human poverty. We show that stepping up to that demand depends on having an awareness of lucid professional values. Meeting (1), we also argue, will help create (2) *synergy* with the developing humanistic model.

# Demand

Poverty has multiple definitions (Iceland, 2005). They range from absolute (e.g., the World Bank's "dollar-a-day" indicator) to relative (e.g., the "Gini Coefficient," a ratio between rich and poor incomes). Holding sway today is the definition of poverty advocated by Economics Nobel Laureate Sen (1999). Sen's approach is inherently humanistic. It stresses that poverty is fundamentally about restrictions on human freedoms, across health, education, and occupation. Known as the "basic capabilities" approach, Sen's humanistic conceptualization is embodied in the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals, or "MDGs" (Annan, 2000). The MDGs are hugely influential globally. From Table 1, their primary goal (Goal 1) is humanistic, and it is undergirded by human capabilities (Goals 2–8).

"Grand plans" to reduce human poverty have been proposed (and not met) before, and the MDGs have been criticized for being overly "top down" (Easterly, 2006). Easterly's critique highlights a lack of advice on how the MDGs translate into goals at work, even though the latter can be critical to organizational success (Locke & Latham, 2002). The argument has gravitas. Literally millions of organizations, worldwide, are at work on the MDGs. They include the "multilaterals" across the UN, World Health Organization, and Development Banks. Added to these are a plethora of national aid agencies (like USAID); government departments (donor and recipient); non-government organizations (NGOs), international (>40 000) and national (1–2 million in India alone); HR consultancy firms and individuals; and commercial entrepreneurs running SMEs or community groups (see work by M. Frese and colleagues, for an exemplary review, Baum, Frese, & Baron, 2007).

Multi-national and national companies, of course, are major players. Their potential to develop local capacity is massive; it far exceeds that of organizations that are not-for-profit (Manning, 2006). Even firms based exclusively outside of the poorest regions, in migrant-receiving countries, may fail to select (access bias) or promote (treatment bias), skilled immigrants from low-income economies (Coates & Carr, 2005). Such barriers are biases. They add "brain waste" to brain drain (Carr, Inkson, & Thorn, 2005). They also bring your neighborhood firm, inside "developed" economies, into the picture.

Directly or indirectly, therefore, poverty reduction is part of quotidian work behavior and psychology, globally (MacLachlan & Carr, 2005). Lefkowitz's (2008), call for a Science-Practitioner-



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Table 1. The Millennium Development Goals

| The UN Millennium Development Goals |
|---|
| Goal 1: Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger |
| • Reduce by half the proportion of people living on less than a dollar a day |
| • Reduce by half the proportion of people who suffer from hunger |
| Goal 2: Achieve universal primary education |
| • Ensure that all boys and girls complete a full course of primary education |
| Goal 3: Promote gender equality and empower women |
| • Eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education preferably by 2005, and at all levels by 2015 |
| Goal 4: Reduce child mortality |
| • Reduce by two-thirds the mortality rate among children under five |
| Goal 5: Improve maternal health |
| • Reduce by three-quarters the maternal mortality ratio |
| Goal 6: Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases |
| • Halt and begin to reverse the spread of HIV/AIDS |
| • Halt and begin to reverse the incidence of malaria and other major diseases |
| Goal 7: Ensure environmental sustainability |
| • Integrate the principles of sustainable development into country policies and programs; reverse loss of environmental resources |
| • Reduce by half the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water |
| • Achieve significant improvement in lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers, by 2020 |
| Goal 8: Develop a global partnership for development |
| • Develop further an open trading and financial system that is rule-based, predictable, and non-discriminatory, includes a commitment to good governance, development, and poverty reduction—nationally and internationally |
| • Address the least developed countries' special needs. This includes tariff- and quota-free access for their exports; enhanced debt relief for heavily indebted poor countries; cancellation of official bilateral debt; and more generous official development assistance for countries committed to poverty reduction |
| • Address the special needs of landlocked and small island developing states |
| • Deal comprehensively with developing countries' debt problems through national and international measures to make debt sustainable in the long term |
| • In cooperation with the developing countries, develop decent and productive work for youth |
| • In cooperation with pharmaceutical companies, provide access to affordable essential drugs in developing countries |
| • In cooperation with the private sector, make available the benefits of new technologies—especially information and communications technologies |

*Source*: Extracted from http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/goals.html (accessed 6 April 2007).

*Humanist* model, resonates loudly with much of what is happening—and what is needed—in organizations today.

## *Process*

Despite the changed landscape, Organizational Psychology has yet to say much about poverty reduction generally (Carr, 2007). Some of our quietude may simply reflect lack of experience on "how to" become involved. One guiding process can be found in the United Nations' blueprint for implementing the MDGs, the "Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness" (http://www.adb.org/media/articles/2005/7033_international_community_aid/paris_declaration.pdf). Despite the name, it is not restricted to aid. Key principles include "harmonization" (non-duplication between donor agencies) and "alignment" (of those agencies with local priorities, including community and business



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organizations). Harmonization and alignment have stimulated demand for know-how in inter-organizational and other forms of organizational behavior (Jackson & Klobas, 2008). Included in these, for instance, is governance, which has been linked to both organizational justice (Ferrinho & Van Lerberghe, 2002) and institutional culture (Chu, 2003).

Through its emphasis on harmonization, the Paris Declaration has opened a door, in poverty reduction, for "inter-disciplinarity" (MacLachlan, Carr, & McWha, 2008). That need has been fuelled further by the MDGs falling behind target (Ehrenpreis, 2007). Today, it is not surprising that a range of disciplines is represented at policy roundtables, development conferences, and research capacity meetings. Unfortunately, Organizational Psychology is very rarely among them, and thus is very rarely included in the process for working toward the MDGs.

## *Mechanism?*

Currently, a range of international and national associations has various representatives to key development bodies like the United Nations. These institutions include the IUPsyS (International Union of Psychological Science), the IAAP (International Association of Applied Psychology), and the APA (American Psychological Association). In order to help unite, coalesce and fortify those voices, we have launched a Global Task Force (Reichman et al., 2008). Its rationale is summarized in Table 2 (Carr & MacLachlan, 2008). Table 2 is more the beginning of a process than an end-product. It is a statement of aspiration that connects with policy principles like harmonization and alignment. It is set in the conditional future. That future has yet to be mapped out. As a key, we are still seeking membership and representation from low-income and transition-economies, whose participation and voice of course remains integral to alignment[1]. Ultimately, the group may help to foster greater capacity within the discipline and profession itself, in those lower income economies. The wider point for the present is that the task force may form a useful basis, a mechanism, for helping address our relative lack of participation *as a discipline and profession.*

Despite its early stages, the Task Force does clearly differ from other initiatives concerned with poverty reduction. It advocates for a particular body of knowledge and practice, Organizational Psychology. Its distinctive contribution to poverty reduction will be to bring to the attention of organizations working on the MDGs, what the profession has to offer in that goal. Its own specific goals are to (1) solicit and coordinate input from within Organizational Psychology and (2) connect (1) with the major aid agencies and think tanks globally. At present unfortunately, they do not really know that we (Organizational Psychologists and Psychology) exist; let alone what we precisely "stand for." The aims of the Task Force to date are evenly divided between research (e.g., on pay discrepancy) and practice (e.g., on advocacy training). Its efforts will be focused evenly on northern and southern hemispheres, for example, adopting a "cities" approach in which members of the—still growing—task force will lobby agencies in their location. Literature on distributed teams would suggest its activities would be facilitated by some face-to-face meetings. Generally, however, labor would be divided evenly between the members, according to location and specialization. Time-out from regular jobs may require funding support, from within the profession and/or from MDG-focused organizations. Its time-line is logically synchronized with the MDGs (ending 2015). Its performance could be monitored via quantum produced in a "Global Special Issue on Poverty Reduction" planned for mid-2010 and launched at the recent international conference in Berlin (http://www.iupsys.org). Outcomes will also, we hope, be monitored and disseminated by global think tanks like the OECD's *Development Centre* (MacLachlan & Carr, 2005).

[1]Since writing, we have been joined by Professor Peter K. Baguma, Head of Organizational Psychology at Uganda's Makerere University in Kampala.



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Table 2. The Global Task Force on Organizational Psychology for Development

Poverty reduction and international development cooperation present enormous challenges and opportunities to those who seek to improve people's lives through Work Psychology. A major international response is required to address these challenges. The international community of work/industrial/organizational psychologists wish to work in partnership with others who have similar interests to develop a global initiative which can be a powerful mechanism to identify how, where, and when psychology can contribute to poverty alleviation, particularly as it affects the lives of those in low-income countries.

We call for the establishment of a global initiative to bring the potential benefits of Work/Industrial/Organizational Psychology to bear on the reduction of human poverty. These areas of psychology should play a key role in the consultation, design, delivery, and evaluation of international aid; in the partnerships on which capacity development depends; and in the provision of essential human services to health, education, and industry. While some important work has already been done in these areas, the potential contribution of Work/Industrial/Organizational Psychology is greatly underdeveloped. A Global Task Force is needed to identify how to step up the scale, impact and funding of such activities, and to do so in an integrated fashion. The Global Task Force should have broad representation from low-, middle-, and high-income countries, and ensure that efforts to address poverty do not reproduce the injustices that often give rise to it. The Task Force should be non-aligned to interests arising from national or professional society affiliations, and should use the human rights values espoused by the UN as its touchstone.

Millions of people all over the world are working in organizations that have a positive influence on poverty reduction. We call for a Global Task Force that will help to align Work Psychology initiatives for poverty reduction and to harmonize them with efforts toward realizing the MDGs.
We ask the UN to mandate a Global Task Force on Organizational Psychology for Development.

*Source*: Carr and MacLachlan (2008).

# Synergy (With Renewing Supply)

## *Humanist versus corporate objectives*

A criticism of the current scientist-practitioner model is that Organizational Psychology has supplanted psychology's humanist tradition with corporate objectives. Unlike clinical practice, organizational practice serves two masters, organization and worker. When conflicts of interest arise, there can be relative neglect of "individual employees and the commonweal" (Lefkowitz, 2008, p. 442). The emerging field of "organizational health psychology" does not go far enough (p. 443). There should be more service to "underserved constituencies" like "contingent workforces" and "non-profit organizations" (2008, p. 443).

A psychology of poverty reduction might marry these ideals, for several reasons. First, organizations working under MDG1 have as their mission not only profit and/or efficiency but a humanistic concern: reducing human poverty. Second, the MDGs in Table 1 are overtly focused on "underserved constituencies," including "the poor" themselves, sweat-shop workers, and employees who live in economically deprived communities (e.g., local aid workers). Practice is therefore "harmonized" with group (and individual) poverty reduction; and it is "aligned," directly, with the commonweal.

## *Good versus bad faith*

A second criticism against a scientist-practitioner model is that it is unaware that its own "neutrality" and "scientific objectivity" are actually value-laden (Lefkowitz, 2008, p. 443). The values are efficiency, effectiveness, and productivity (p. 444). Euphemisms like "right-sizing" suggest that the



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profession sometimes chooses to be complicit in a marketing exercise, rather than exercising a professional conscience (Lefkowitz, 2008, p. 445; see Munro, 1983).

Bad faith like this has a parallel in poverty work. "Structural Adjustment Programs" (or SAPs) had their heyday last century (Easterly, 2006). The idea was to "rein-in" poorer governments by making aid conditional on a rapid transition to markets—termed "shock therapy" (2006, p. 65). Therapy was administered via structural adjustment loans to streamline health services and finance imports, for example. Local organizations like health services, and their workers, and ultimately the public, bore the brunt. SAPs did not work; and drew flak because they failed to take into account social consequences from their neo-liberal policies (George, 1990). Today, SAPs have ceded ground to the more collaboratively aligned Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs).

## *Normative versus perceptual*

Organizational Psychology has tended to theorize and research *perceptions* of organizational justice, rather than what is *actually* just. In the case of pay discrepancies (sic "diversity"), an organizational psychologist studies the perceptions of employees affected; perhaps helping an employer make the gaps more palatable (via selection or training). The unjust system itself, though, is rarely questioned, but sometimes undergirded by "scientific" Organizational Psychology.

Pay discrepancies are a key feature of aid work generally. In fact they can be acute, due to differences in the rich versus poor economies that pay the workers' salaries. Compounding the disparity, and injustice, local counterparts (paid much less) are frequently more experienced than their expatriate counterparts (Carr, McAuliffe, & MacLachlan, 1998; MacLachlan & Carr, 2005). Admittedly, this research focuses on "perceived" injustice in pay. It finds locally and internationally salaried workers alike perceiving un-fairness. Locals are angry; expatriates disconnected from local colleagues. Hence extreme pay diversity may help fuel early return by expatriates, brain drain among locals, and disengagement from poverty reduction work generally.

Outcomes like these directly undermine the work of any organization, aid or corporate, seeking to drive poverty down. Policy-wise, pay discrepancy is neither harmonized (between overseas agencies) nor aligned (with local aspirations). The need to address pay injustice *perceptions* by making recommendations for pay justice *restoration*, is currently being acknowledged (http://poverty.massey.ac.nz/).

## *Management versus community*

Pro-management bias can manifest in a number of ways, from supporting an employer not employee, in cases of wrongful dismissal, to assisting organizations to manipulate a green image for ulterior motives (Lefkowitz, 2008, p. 447). Lefkowitz argues that greater humanistic integrity could make us more rather than less distinctive and differentiated in the current landscape. From Table 1, Goal 8 ("Develop a global partnership for development. . .in cooperation with the private sector") includes development cooperation, for example, between business and not-profit sectors (World Business Council for Sustainable Development, 2005). MacLachlan and Carr's (2005) research on pay discrepancy (above) focuses equally on aid organizations, joint ventures, and commercial organizations. In a global landscape, extreme pay diversity is not confined to, nor an exclusive concern of, not-profit groups (Festing, Eidems, & Royer, 2007; Toh & De Nisi, 2005). By engaging with such an environment, psychology may thus become less subverted to purely commercial interests; and more distinctive.



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### *Inclusion versus exclusion*

A final form of distinctiveness for differentiation is to foster "employee advocacy and betterment" (2008, p. 447). We can advocate for the "millions of workers who are disenfranchised or forgotten in some way" (Ferdman & Maynard, 2008, p. 1). Under alignment, marginalized groups can also learn how to advocate for themselves (http://www.diplomacydialogue.org), in the process of producing more inclusive PRSPs. Training guidelines for such human capabilities have been derived from Organizational Psychology on bargaining and negotiation, and published by the International Labour Organization (Yiu & Saner, 2005).

## Conclusion

The MDGs and the Paris Declaration encourage organizations not only to be efficient, effective, and productive. They should also be scientific, practical, and humanistic. The ambition of the MDGs calls for Organizational Psychology to make an ambitious contribution to promoting effective organizational behavior—from facilitating organizational learning in well-endowed UN organizations, to enhancing the advocacy capabilities of impoverished community groups, and much in between. While no system (humanism included) is perfect or risk-free (Hammond, 2008), a more humanistic science and practice will both contribute to, and develop in, the new global landscape (Gelfand, Leslie, & Fehr, 2008). That landscape compels us to promote more effective ways to alleviate poverty, both locally and globally.

## Author biographies

**Stuart C. Carr** is a Professor of Psychology at Massey University in New Zealand, where he coordinates the international *Poverty Research Group* (PRG). The PRG is currently funded by the UK's ESRC and DFID to undertake a multi-country study of pay diversity in aid work and joint ventures. Stuart has authored, co-authored and edited or co-edited numerous books and papers on the Organizational Psychology of Poverty Reduction.

**Malcolm MacLachlan** is an Associate Professor at the Centre for Global Health & School of Psychology in Trinity College Dublin and Extraordinary Professor of Disability & Development, at Stellenbosch University, South Africa. His interests are in inclusive development, strengthening health systems in low-income countries, and identifying effective evidence-policy-action pathways. Mac currently leads funded projects across 15 low-income countries, supported by a range of Irish, UK, and EU funding agencies.

**Walter Reichman** (EdD) is a Professor Emeritus of Psychology at Baruch College, City University of New York. He is also a Vice President of Sirota Survey Intelligence, an international Industrial/ Organizational Psychology firm specializing in survey research of employees and customers. Emeritus Professor Reichman has liaised extensively between the IAAP and the United Nations, where he is a representative to the Economic and Social Council.

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**Adrian Furnham** is a Professor of Psychology at University College London, and a Fellow of the British Psychological Society. He is ranked the second most productive psychologist in the world since 1980. Professor Furnham has written over 650 scientific papers and 48 books, many on socio-cultural and socio-economic issues, for example, Culture Shock (1994), The New Economic Mind (1995), The Psychology of Money (1998), and Just for the Money (2006).

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