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The Scientist–Practitioner Gap Among Master’s Level I-O Psychology Practitioners: A Text-Analytic Exploration

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The scientist–practitioner gap in the field of industrial-organizational psychology refers to the poor connection between evidence generated by academia and the perceived practicality and use of that evidence by practitioners in industry (Aguinis, et al., 2017; Levy, 2017). This gap is the result of many complex issues, two of which are: (a) practitioners moving away from established evidence-based practices rooted in the scientific literature, and (b) academics conducting research that is perceived to have little to no practical relevance to the applied world. I-O psychology is recognized as an applied discipline, and a sizable gap between practitioners and scientists limits the effectiveness of both (O’Neil, 2008).

Recent calls for a greater emphasis on evidence-based management (Briner & Rousseau, 2011) have increased the need for I-O psychologists to reflect on the relationship between science and practice. The nature of I-O psychology and its relevance to the workplace have been concerns for years (Cascio, 1995) but are especially relevant today. As new entrants (e.g., data scientists) join the marketplace, a professional identity becomes ever more important (Nolan, Islam, & Quatrone, 2014). Although discussion of an identity crisis within the field is an important topic of research (Gasser, Butler, Waddilove, & Tan, 2004; Ryan, 2003; Ryan & Ford, 2010), we seek to extend the scientist–practitioner gap discourse by qualitatively exploring the perspectives of a different subset of the practitioners, namely master’s level I-O practitioners.

Exploring the relationship between science and practice by investigating the perspectives of master’s level I-O practitioners will expand the scope of the scientist–practitioner gap research. The majority of scientist–practitioner gap research concentrates on the role of doctoral-level academics and practitioners (Halffhill & Huff, 2003; Toaddy, 2015). Although the activity of doctoral-level practitioners is important, recent SIOP membership trends (Ruland, 2017) seem to indicate a rising tide of master’s level practitioners entering the workforce. A review of the SIOP Graduate Training Program database conducted by the researchers indicates that 4.5 times more students were reported to have graduated with a terminal master’s degree than a doctoral level degree in I-O psychology per year (based on reported 2016 degrees awarded). Despite the number of master’s level practitioners entering the field, their views and perspectives have not been the focal point of the majority of scientist–practitioner gap research. Without a comprehensive un-
nderstanding of these perspectives, the self-reflection of the field will prove to be limited. (Anseel, Carette, Lang, & Lievens, 2014; Lefkowitz, 2014; Smerek, 2010). With the rapid rise of the number of I-O psychology practitioners (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015; SIOP, 2015) and the recent trends in the increase of master’s level graduates graduating from online programs (Landers, 2017), a deeper understanding of the experiences of master’s level practitioners is of great importance.

Method

The researchers of the present inquiry sought to address this issue by approaching the scientist–practitioner gap using a qualitative methodology based on the work of Toaddy (2015). A qualitative method was chosen to better understand the “what” sentiments (Wertz, et al., 2011) of practitioners’ focus. Two researchers developed semistructured interview questions based on Toaddy’s (2015) questions. The semistructured interview questions can be found in Table 1. The researchers sought to answer the following broad research questions:

1. How do master’s level I-O psychology practitioners view their role in conducting research?
2. How do master’s level I-O psychology practitioners conduct I-O psychology practice?
3. What resources do they use and what approach do they take?
4. How do master’s level practitioners view their careers and career opportunities in comparison to PhDs?

Table 1

Table 1: Interview Questions

1. What is your definition of the scientist–practitioner model as it applies to your own professional life?
   a. (Follow-up) Do you consider yourself a scientist–practitioner?
   b. What are the greatest challenges (impediments) you face in your attempt to enact that model personally at work (including, perhaps, a lack of interest in enacting the model)?
   c. (Follow-up) What, if anything, could/should be done to remove these impediments?
2. What resources do you turn to when working on projects? Do you turn to trade publications (e.g., HR Magazine, T&D Magazine), research journals (e.g., JAP, Personnel Psychology), and/or benchmarking sites (e.g., CEB: executiveboard.com, SHRM.org)?
   a. (Follow-up) Which resources do you use more often?
   b. (Follow-up) Which resources do you find more useful for accomplish your work?
3. What is the role of the scientific I-O psychology literature in your work?
4. Do you feel that your work impacts the I-O psychology research agenda or research literature? Why or why not?
5. Do you get involved in I-O practitioner research at work (e.g., white papers, unpublished proprietary research, etc.) and/or I-O academic research (peer reviewed articles)?
6. In your view what is the difference between a master’s level practitioner and a PhD level practitioner?
   a. (Follow-up) Do you feel master’s level practitioners have different career opportunities than PhD level practitioners?
   b. (Follow-up) Did your master’s program share with you the limitations of your degree?
7. Do you feel that organizations view those with a master’s degree in I-O as scientists?
8. Do you feel that organizations see master’s level practitioners as merely HR with a different degree/title?
9. Do you have any other comments about the scientist–practitioner gap?
   a. What is your proposed solution for the gap between scientists and practitioners?
Nine individuals with master’s in I-O psychology were recruited to participate in a semistructured interview about the scientist–practitioner gap. Three practitioners each were purposively chosen at different career levels: early career (0–3 years), midcareer (3–9 years), and established career (9+ years). Interview participants were assured confidentiality. A summary of the participants’ career experience and demographic information can be found in Table 2. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. The transcribed interviews were delivered to the researchers in the form of text files.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Career level</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Job titles</th>
<th>Role type</th>
<th>Industry</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Early career</td>
<td>2 women, 1 man</td>
<td>HR generalist, HR manager, junior project manager</td>
<td>Internal and external consulting</td>
<td>Media and web design, market research, mass media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Midcareer</td>
<td>2 women, 1 man</td>
<td>Consultant, HR generalist, OD manager</td>
<td>Internal and external consulting</td>
<td>Healthcare, food and beverage, media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Established career</td>
<td>2 men, 1 woman</td>
<td>Training consultant, Instructional designer, OD manager</td>
<td>Internal and external consulting</td>
<td>Food and beverage, mass media, training and development</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Results

Text Analyses

The transcripts of the interviews were analyzed using Tropes, a text analysis program, which allowed the researchers to conduct initial text mining and identify general themes in a corpus of the text. In the present study, the analyses were conducted on a question-by-question basis. The result of the text mining can be found in Table 3.

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Concept extracted</th>
<th>Occurrence in all documents</th>
<th>Interpretation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What is your definition of the scientist–practitioner model as it applies to your own professional life?</td>
<td>Data, Research, Clients, Business, Science</td>
<td>56%, 44%, 33%, 33%</td>
<td>Data and research are necessary to provide support for the work of practitioners. Clients implicitly request rigorous work. However, practitioners must balance the needs of science with the needs of business.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you consider yourself a scientist–practitioner?</td>
<td>Science/scientist, practitioner, Clients</td>
<td>50%, 38%, 25%</td>
<td>Despite the occurrences of the term scientist and science many master’s level practitioners see</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What are the greatest challenges (impediments) you face in your attempt to enact that model personally at work (including, perhaps, a lack of interest in enacting the model)?

- Research: 25%
- Time: 33%
- Business: 33%
- Balance: 22%
- Understanding: 22%
- Data: 22%

Even for master’s level I-O practitioners, balance between the business needs and scientific needs seems to be a challenge. Especially potent are challenges with regards to time.

What resources do you turn to when working on projects? Do you turn to trade publications?

- Publications: 44%
- Journals: 33%
- HR Magazine: 22%
- Leadership Council: 22%
- Best practices: 22%

Publications were used however most of these seemed to be trade publications or vendor provided documents rather than academic research literature. Vendor provided documents via a consulting company like CEB are used because they have best practices, established templates, and benchmark data, which academic research publications do not have.

Do you have any other comments about the scientist–practitioner gap?

- Scientific approach: 33%
- Field: 33%
- Statistics: 33%
- Career: 33%
- People: 56%

The PhD level practitioner may be viewed as more capable and credible to some clients however most master’s level practitioners view themselves as being equally capable. Interview participants felt that master’s level practitioners entered the workforce earlier in their careers which provides more experience over PhD graduates. They do feel that over time that PhDs and master’s level candidates have equivalent opportunities in industry because master’s level practitioner gain valuable people skills that a PhD level practitioner takes more time to gain.

Do you feel master’s level practitioners have different career opportunities than PhD level practitioners?

- People: 56%

People
Responses to several interview questions developed by the researchers were summarized in Table 4. Table 4 displays percentages that indicate the level of agreement participants expressed regarding the posed questions. When reflecting on the responses, several things can be surmised. First, all interviewees felt as though their work was not and would not contribute to research in the field of I-O psychology. This view demonstrates that the practitioners themselves do not feel their work is valuable to advancing the scientific agenda for the field. Most participants asserted that they want access to academic research but that their organization did not provide it. This further exacerbates the gap; if practitioners do not have access to research they can neither use nor contribute to it. Last, the master’s-level I-O participants did not feel that organizations valued them as scientists but that they were simply “HR with a different degree.” This indicates a lack of brand identity for those trained in I-O versus those trained in HR. In addition to these reflections, the researchers reviewed the responses to the questions summarized in Table 4 and identified that despite the lack of effect on I-O research, all interview participants expressed positive attitudes towards the I-O research literature. A review of the responses indicated hopefulness on the part of the interview participants of finding a solution to the gap in the applied and academic worlds.

Table 4

Percentage Agreement With Select Interview Questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Experience level</th>
<th>Percent agreement with question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Do you feel that your work impacts the I-O psychology research agenda or research literature?</td>
<td>Early career</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Midcareer</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Established career</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If you had access to scientific research literature would you use it?</td>
<td>Early career</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Midcareer</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Established</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you feel that organizations view those with a master’s degree in I-O as scientists?</td>
<td>Early career</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Midcareer</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Established</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you feel that organizations see master’s level practitioners as merely HR with a different degree/title?</td>
<td>Early career</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Midcareer</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Established</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The researchers also approached the corpus of text from a more traditional qualitative approach. The interview transcripts were reviewed by two graduate-level researchers who identified three broad themes in the interview responses. The identified themes were (a) Balancing Science and Practice, (b) Research and Resources, and (c) Master’s Versus PhD Educational and Career Differences. The content coders also identified representative quotes that embody the themes and issues that interview participants expressed. Representative quotes can be found in Table 5.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension 1: Balancing Science and Practice</th>
<th>Dimension 2: Research and Resources</th>
<th>Dimension 3: Master's Versus PhD Educational and Career Differences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Early career</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;I learned more from professors who were adjuncts or part-time, because they were actually implementing and working and doing the stuff they were teaching...They gave us real life experiences and I think I found it much more relatable.&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;Well, actually SHRM.org I think it's a combination of all of the above. I think that you know, I'll actually add another question so if we think about some of the clients I'm working with I'm not interested they like the concept of like the HR Magazine so to speak but when you look at you know, getting down to the actual mechanics of the type of work that we're doing that is probably ahm publication.&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;I think that they think of people [with master’s] as subject matter experts but as scientists? I don't know.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;I feel like learning in school...is not as up-to-date...I'm not saying like ten years old but it's definitely not like what's in a year or two.&quot;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Midcareer</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am not going to, even in some of the journals that I provided articles for or coauthored I am not going to those places anymore.</td>
<td>&quot;I actually I go to CEB a lot. you've heard about them, right? So I use CEB a lot I use google white papers a lot I used to use research journals when I have the access&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;I suppose it depends on how long you stay in the role as a practitioner. The longer the people are in the role as a practitioner, the smaller the divide becomes; it becomes much more practitioner-focused. But straight out of the university program, I think the divide is pretty big. At master’s level, it tends to be much more practitioner-focused and the PhD level is much more academic-focused in the beginning. Over time, you learn how to talk the language of your client and if the clients do not demand it, you are not going to do it.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;And I use, sometimes I use SIOP but not as much.&quot;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;Sometimes I use LinkedIn. I use it more as a benchmark.&quot;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
“So it is sort of bouncing between what's a must have from a scientific perspective and a scientific method, and what sort a nice to have in terms of going above and beyond from a science perspective that may not always align with the business implementation timing perspective. It may not align with sample size; it may not align with the ability to communicate certain things to certain groups of employees. So really deepening on what you are really doing there are some practical limitations.”

“We certainly write quite a few white papers and have in the past here around different things. Interestingly enough, it's probably more functionally base. I have written several within this function for different R&D folks where there is a talent component versus pure I.O. white papers.”

“My personal observation with Ph.D. practitioners, to no fault of their own, [is that] they are experts in the statistics and the numbers and what the data is saying, So they are focused on things like effect size and what the numbers look like behind the data. And I agree that is all very important, but I think sometimes they may struggle with translating it to what it means for the business or business speaker, or translating science findings in general to corporate application.”

“The takeaway is to seek out a company that gets it, and then that's where you will go feel like you are an I.O and not just an H.R person [...] I think some business partners get it because some of them do have an I.O background, but I wouldn't say that most people in the company outside of H.R would even know what I.O is. But that being said, most people in the world don't know really know what I.O unless they're in the corporate field. Even then, it's very hard to get that concept across as to what it is that we do.”
Summary Results by Career Level

Early career. Those just beginning their careers found themselves experiencing a notable gap between science and practice. The interview participants stated that there is a disconnect between what is taught in graduate school and what is required in industry. The prevailing opinion was that what was learned throughout a practitioner’s education is helpful, but the key to balancing science and practice was learning how psychological theories can and should be applied in real life organizational situations. Interviewees at this career stage mentioned that experience is needed to address the scientist–practitioner gap. This balance comes through experience or coaching from experienced practitioners.

One of the key insights is that practitioners do not have access to peer-reviewed journals to reference I-O psychology research literature. As an alternative, interview participants use benchmarking tools as resources. These benchmarking tools are referenced from sources such as CEB and Harvard Business Review (HBR). The interviewees also use colleagues as sources of information, or they utilize what is working for other organizations. They leverage these identified practices as a starting point for the projects they are working on.

Regarding the differences between master’s and PhD holders, those at this stage of career do not think there is a substantial difference in career opportunities. It was agreed that the primary difference between master’s and PhD I-O psychology professionals is that the PhD holders are more heavily invested in research, whereas those with a master’s degree are more likely to have practitioner experience.

Midcareer: The interviewees at this career stage recognized that a gap exists between academia and industry. They also emphasized the necessity to translate theoretical ideas and statistical evidence into more meaningful content for business outcomes. Midcareer practitioners found it more useful to use resources such as CEB and white papers as reference. Peer-reviewed journals were used to a lesser extent. However, interview participants stated that the use of peer-reviewed journals required translation of academic jargon into terms applicable to their organization as well as difficulty maintaining access to scientific journals.

The interviewees agreed that there is a difference in career opportunities for individuals with PhD’s versus those with a master’s. For example, I-O psychologists with doctorates are more open to working in academia or in more statistics and data-driven roles. They also mentioned that although more options may be available for someone with a doctorate, master’s level practitioners have ample opportunities as well. There was also agreement that it is likely that organizations do not view people with a master’s in I-O psychology as scientists.

Established Career

These interviewees touched on the idea that there can be a gap between science and practice depending on project stakeholders. When working with clients, there is not much interest in talking about the science behind the practice. Resources such as HBR and CEB and databases of that nature are the most utilized. They echo the idea that the people they work with are most interested in benchmarking against other organizations and their practices rather than looking to scientific research. These interviewees varied on their view of the differences between an I-O psychology PhD versus a master’s. However, they did agree, to some extent, that work experience and years being a practitioner can lessen the differences. A PhD might be more interested in research and theory and less able to apply and translate it into business language at the beginning of their career, but as time and experience increases, these skills
begin to look similar in both master’s and PhD I-O professionals. Overall, this group agreed organizations do not view I-O psychology practitioners at the master’s level as scientists. However, there was discussion that this perception depends on the organization and their understanding of what an I-O psychology practitioner does.

**Career Progression**

In reviewing the answers received from the nine interviews, the researchers noticed a complexity of the answers with career progression. For example, those early in their careers indicated the wide gap between science and practice. However, those at the midcareer stage went further to emphasize the need to translate theoretical work into business language. Similarly, those at the early stages of their career agreed that there are large differences in the educational levels and career paths of master’s and PhD holders. However, those with more experience gave more nuanced answers, indicating that the differences depend on the industry and opportunities. Those in the midcareer stage indicated that master’s-level I-O practitioners enter the workforce earlier in their careers which grants them more professional experience over PhD graduates. This progression in the complexities of responses may be due to the growing experience in the field and the increase in responsibilities.

**Discussion**

Although much research has been conducted on the issue of the scientist–practitioner gap, there has been a dearth of research on the experience of master’s level I-O psychology practitioners using the specific methods presented in this work. As far as the researchers have found, the present study represents the first effort at such an analysis. Although a small sample size limits this study, several conclusions can be drawn from the insights gained from the interviews.

**A Different Perspective on the Scientist–Practitioner Gap**

Answering recent calls to expand the scientist–practitioner gap research (Yuan & Brown, 2017), the present study sought to address the scientist–practitioner gap from a different perspective. Though PhD-level practitioners have been the focus of most of the scientist–practitioner gap research, the present study found initial evidence that master’s-level practitioners also experience and recognize the gap. Master’s-level practitioners experience the gap as an expression of their own views of their limitations as practitioners and a perception by organizations of their role within the company. In the current interviewee sample, it seems master’s-level I-O practitioners perceive themselves to be outside of the scientific realm and thus focus more on practical issues of project completion and satisfying stakeholders. This study highlights the disconnect between the experience of master’s level practitioners in their education versus the one attained while practicing in the field.

Another concept expressed both explicitly and implicitly by the interview participants was the need for a stronger brand identity of I-O psychology. Many of the interview participants perceived that their coworkers viewed them as a different form of HR. This echoes the concerns of prior research about the brand identity of I-O psychology (Nolan, Islam, Quartrone, 2014; Nolan, 2017). Master’s level practitioners may need to gain a greater sense of the unique qualities of I-O psychology in relation to human resources in their graduate training.

**Research Resources**
Master’s level practitioners may value research, but the results of the present study indicate that many do not have access to research databases and research journals. Recent SIOP initiatives to provide research database access to members may prove to be a key to decreasing the size of the scientist–practitioner gap. Without access to academic journal articles, practitioners base project decisions on Google searches, vendor-provided data, and white papers. This is a significant limitation to the reach of academic research. Despite the intentions of master’s level practitioners or the quality of academic research, study results that cannot be accessed cannot be used. Despite not having access to academic resources, interviewees expressed positive regard for academic research indicating that the issue is not one of value but one of access and opportunity for use.

The results also indicate the importance of applied research conducted by consulting firms. This vendor provided research seems to serve as the primary source of much of the decision making that occurs in industry regarding HR and I-O related projects. The results of the present study highlight the importance of the evidence-based management movement. Consulting research and practitioner materials should be placed under more rigorous scrutiny due to their prevalent use by practitioners.

The researchers would also like to recommend that more journals generate easily accessible or open access research. Although this recommendation is not a direct finding of the present study, the open science movement may prove beneficial for master’s-level practitioners searching for a scientific basis for their organizational interventions. SIOP’s initiative to provide members with access to academic research and new journals such as Personnel Decisions and Assessments that are scientifically rigorous and open access may pave the way for greater access to practitioners.

**Connection to Science**

Another interesting finding was the lack of connection between master’s level practitioners and the science of I-O psychology. Although the scientist–practitioner model is built to train all master’s and PhD level I-O psychology practitioners in both conducting research and applying research, it appears that master’s level practitioners are most comfortable with practice while eschewing research. It may be worthwhile for SIOP to reach out to master’s level practitioners to provide resources and opportunity to conduct research. Master’s level I-O psychology graduate programs should reflect on whether their training is providing students with enough confidence to speak on scientific issues in their organizations.

**Limitations and Future Research**

The present research has some key limitations. Although the researchers sought diversity in their sample by seeking varied perspectives among different training and career level I-O psychologists, the sample of interview participants was quite small. Future research should try to conduct interviews across a larger group of master’s level practitioners. A greater variety of industry experience may also be valuable in future studies of the scientist–practitioner gap among master’s level practitioners. A larger more varied sample could provide an answer to Aguinis et al (2017)’s question regarding the scientist–practitioner divide occurring later in a practitioner’s career.

Future research should try to understand the processes by which I-O psychology practitioners conduct projects. In the present study, some of the participants hinted at issues of project management. Project management issues are not often discussed in I-O psychology education, but it may prove fruitful to learn more about how project management affects I-O psychology practice. In addition, understanding the specific topic areas that are most relevant to practitioners, and the challenges they face can create a
stronger connection to researchers. This would provide researchers with topics that are more likely to be leveraged by practitioners. Researchers should attempt to gain a greater understanding of the additional nonpeer reviewed sources of data that are used in organizing, administering, and implementing human capital projects within organizations.

Finally, future research should focus on the brand image of I-O psychology. The comments from the interviewees regarding the lack of distinction between HR and I-O leads to a clear sign that there is not enough brand distinction being drawn between I-O and HR (Nolan, Islam, & Quartrone, 2014; Nolan, 2017). Future research should continue to understand the distinctions between HR and I-O and whether individuals outside of the field of I-O psychology understand these differences.

A focus of the field of I-O psychology is furthering the evidence-base to inform practice (Aguinis et al., 2017). Yet, the scientist–practitioner gap persists. It is important to recognize the perspectives of practitioners to gain insight into the barriers they face in implementing evidence based practice and potential solutions that might better link scientific findings to their practical application. A stronger connection with these practitioners may provide insights for academics and practitioners related to their use of the science of I-O psychology and the obstacles facing the science’s application in the workplace. With a growing representation in graduate schools and the workforce, a greater focus on master’s level practitioners and the challenges they encounter may lead to improved organizational interventions overall and provide a new avenue for understanding the scholarly impact of I-O psychology research (Behrend & Landers, 2017; Kurtessis, Waters, Alonso, Jones, & Oppler, 2017). Master’s level practitioners may prove to be crucial partners in developing the research agenda and implementing the science of I-O psychology.

References


