FIELD NOTES FROM INSIDE THE FIELD

The I/O Psychology Collective

A prologue on branding, licensure, and what the field is willing to be accountable for.

Written by Haroon, founder of the I/O Psychology Collective
iopsychcollective.com

I often find it frustrating to explain the field that I'm in. It's a question that usually comes up within the first few minutes of meeting someone, and unlike more traditional job titles such as accountant, doctor, lawyer, it never feels straightforward to answer. I can usually sense the question coming and catch myself running through possible responses in my head.

> "*What do you do for work?*"

If I answer "consultant," it offers very little context. Consultant for what? What am I actually consulting on? The conversation almost always turns into a rushed explanation of what I went to school for and a ten-second summary of I/O psychology, which is often cut short or reshaped based on the other person's reaction. While "consultant" may be accurate, it flattens the work into something vague and interchangeable.

If I answer "I work in industrial/organizational psychology," or use any combination of those three buzzwords, it doesn't necessarily help. People are still left unsure of what I actually do. More often than not, I'm met with assumptions that it's workplace therapy or some version of HR. While those areas can overlap with I/O psychology, they don't fully capture the field, and trying to make that distinction in thirty seconds or less often feels like an uphill battle.

Now, the question becomes why. Over time, my explanation has become more polished, but it still doesn't seem to land with the impact I expect. It feels as though the words themselves aren't enough to communicate why I/O psychology matters or why it exists as a standalone field. That leaves me questioning whether this is a problem with how I'm explaining the work or whether the hesitation comes from something deeper.

According to the American Psychological Association (APA), Industrial/Organizational Psychology can be defined as the scientific study of human behavior in organizations and the workplace — a specialty that focuses on deriving principles of individual, group, and organizational behavior and applying that knowledge to solve problems at work. While accurate, this definition seems rather academic in nature and difficult for those unfamiliar with the field to fully understand. In practice, it often leads people to simplify the explanation into something more familiar — usually some version of "oh, so like HR?"

Over time, people may develop a better understanding of what I/O psychology is and what practitioners do, but I'm not convinced they fully grasp its value. The topics we focus on — leadership, training and development, workplace motivation — are generally seen as good ideas and worthwhile conversations. But when it comes time to invest real resources, these initiatives are often deprioritized in favor of more immediate or tangible concerns. Despite being directly tied to organizational performance and long-term outcomes, they tend to be treated as optional rather than essential; important but not necessary. This leaves me wondering why these areas are so easy to agree with in theory, but so difficult to commit to in practice.

I'm writing with more questions than answers, in hopes of better understanding this gap and, in turn, helping I/O practitioners become better equipped to show value. Through a collection of my own reflections, perspectives from others in the field, and relevant research and resources, I hope to better shape the narrative around I/O psychology.

At this point, I expect a range of reactions to what I've shared. Some will be coming from within the field — practitioners who recognize these experiences and have felt similar frustrations. Others, also in the field, may disagree and point to their own success in explaining I/O psychology clearly and making the distinctions that establish it as a standalone discipline. And then there will be those outside the field altogether, reading this and asking a more fundamental question: so what? Why should any of this matter to me?

I also want to recognize that there are important differences in how I/O psychology shows up in practice. Many people do I/O work inside organizations without ever sitting in a department explicitly labeled "I/O psychology." Instead, the work often lives under HR, operations, or adjacent functions, which can further blur the field's identity and visibility. At the same time, academic researchers continue to advance the science of I/O psychology, yet the gap between research and practice feels increasingly wide. Too often, research struggles to translate into real-world application in ways that are accessible, actionable, or economically viable.

I'm sure there are perspectives I haven't named here. As this project unfolds, my goal is to engage with these differing viewpoints — not to arrive at a single, definitive answer, but to better understand whether the challenges I'm describing are personal or symptomatic of a larger issue within the field itself.

What is Industrial/Organizational Psychology?

Aside from the rather academic definition provided by the APA, I think it would be appropriate to start with getting a better understanding of what Industrial/Organizational Psychology actually is. What is the industrial side? What is the organizational side? How does someone become an I/O psychologist? Why are there two different words, and why isn't it consolidated?

As Islam and Schmidt (2019) note, a common definition of I-O psychology is the application of psychological principles to the workplace — deriving principles of individual, group, and organizational behavior and applying that knowledge to the solution of problems at work. Let's break down each arm of the title.

Industrial Psychology

- Focused on measuring and improving the performance, productivity, and efficiency of workers and organizations
- Tends to rely more on quantitative data — surveys, tests, ratings, metrics — to assess the outcomes and effects of various factors on work behavior and performance
- Focuses on the alignment and fit between the individual and the job, the organization, and the environment
- May work more closely with HR, operations, or engineering departments to design, implement, and evaluate work policies, programs, or systems

Key areas of focus include: personnel selection and assessment (job analysis, testing, interviews); training and development; performance appraisal; workplace motivation; job satisfaction and well-being.

Organizational Psychology

- Considers the social, emotional, and motivational aspects of human behavior in the workplace
- Aims to understand and enhance the well-being, satisfaction, and engagement of employees, teams, and leaders, as well as the culture and values of organizations
- May incorporate qualitative data — interviews, observations, narratives, feedback — to explore the meaning behind work behavior
- Tends to focus on the development and growth of the individual, the group, and the organization, and on fostering creativity and innovation
- May work more closely with leadership, strategy, or culture functions

Key areas of focus include: leadership and management; organizational culture and climate; team dynamics; organizational change and development; work-life balance and well-being.

Breaking down the name: Industrial-Organizational Psychology

Going back to the question of "What do you do for work?" — I sometimes say business psychology. I don't say it because it's perfectly accurate, I say it because it's survivable in conversation.

"Consultant" is too vague and "Industrial/Organizational Psychology" is technically correct, but often met with confusion or polite nodding. Business psychology feels like a middle ground: specific enough to give context, general enough to avoid a lecture. Even so, that usually falls flat until I explain further.

The need to clarify, reframe, or translate is what this section is really about. It raises two questions for me: why is its official name Industrial/Organizational Psychology in the first place, and what else can this field be called?

Why Industrial & Organizational?

The roots of I/O psychology trace back to the earliest days of psychology as a science, but its role became especially pronounced during World War I. At the time, psychologists were focused on solving very practical problems at scale. The industrial side emphasized measurement and performance — how to select, train, and evaluate individuals efficiently. The organizational side focused more broadly on how people behave within systems: motivation, morale, leadership, and group dynamics.

Originally, many practitioners referred to themselves simply as industrial psychologists. The addition of "organizational" signaled a meaningful shift — it acknowledged that work is not just about individuals performing tasks, but about people embedded in social systems. That distinction mattered, and still does.

Historically, the name makes sense. Practically, it has become a barrier.

Over time, the scope of I/O psychology has expanded significantly, reflecting the growing complexity of organizations and work

itself. As a result, the field now operates under many different names, which often depend on geography, industry, or audience.

The branding problem & the deeper question

Danielle Suprick, MSIOP, offers a useful list of what else the field gets called: business psychology, organizational psychology, work psychology, occupational psychology, workplace psychology, applied psychology, talent psychology, people science or people analytics psychology, human capital psychology, organizational behavior, employee experience psychology, performance psychology, work & organizational psychology, workforce science, and human factors.

It's often said that I/O psychology has a branding problem. That's not controversial — articles, conference panels, LinkedIn posts, and informal conversations all acknowledge it.

But that's not the most interesting part to me. The more compelling question is: why does it feel like no one is responsible for fixing it? Is this a classic diffusion of responsibility problem, where everyone agrees it's an issue but no one owns it? Or is the task simply too large, too political, or too entrenched in institutional history to meaningfully address?

What would it actually take to rebrand I/O psychology under a more accessible name? Or, at the very least, to centralize and clearly explain the field in a way that's digestible to people outside of it?

Until those questions are taken seriously, I feel we'll likely keep doing what we already do — adapting our titles on the fly, translating our work case by case, and explaining the field one conversation at a time.

Licensure

Licensure in I/O psychology is another area that raises questions for me about why people may question the field's legitimacy as a standalone discipline. The Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology (SIOP), the primary professional organization representing the field, has published guidance outlining its position on licensure. Yet even within that guidance, the path forward feels unclear. The requirements emphasize doctoral training, clinical-style competencies, and supervised practice under a licensed psychologist — models rooted largely in clinical psychology rather than the applied work most I/O practitioners actually do.

As a result, licensure in its current form seems misaligned with the realities of I/O practice. Unless someone intends to provide clinical or therapeutic services in the workplace, it's difficult to see how the existing licensure framework meaningfully supports or protects the work I/O psychologists are trained to do.

If licensure is one of the primary markers of professional legitimacy, what does it say about a field when its licensing process appears borrowed from another discipline?

This ambiguity has real consequences. From my understanding, you can't formally call yourself an I/O psychologist without being licensed, but the pathway to licensure does not clearly reflect I/O psychology as a distinct field. For practitioners like myself, with a master's-level education in I/O psychology, this creates an additional layer of confusion — both in how we describe our work and how the field is perceived by those outside of it.

Certifications and credentialing models for psychology do exist outside of North America. Frameworks such as EuroPsy aim to create standardized professional recognition across European countries, including clearer pathways for applied psychologists working in organizational and workplace contexts. However, these certifications currently have limited practical utility for practitioners based in the United States or Canada, where licensure remains governed by state- and province-specific regulatory bodies.

While models such as EuroPsy suggest that alternative approaches to professional recognition are possible, their limited relevance in North America only reinforces the issue at large: there is no widely accepted, field-specific credentialing pathway that clearly reflects the applied nature of I/O psychology here.

Ultimately, this leaves me with more questions than answers. Why doesn't a licensure exam exist specifically for I/O psychologists in North America? Why has the field struggled to define professional boundaries that align with its applied contributions? While perhaps pessimistic, my instinctive answer is that this reflects the same challenge I've raised elsewhere: I/O psychology is often viewed as important, but not strictly necessary. And until the field can clearly articulate who its

practitioners are and how they are credentialed, I fear the perception may continue to persist.

Why is I/O psychology important?

This is where the question becomes more complicated than it first appears. It's easy to say that leadership, strategy, and workplace motivation are important — I'm confident most people would agree with that. The harder question is what we actually mean by important. Organizations already have leaders, decision-making systems, and cultures long before an I/O psychologist is ever involved. In many cases, those systems have functioned well enough to get the organization where it is today. Because of this, I/O psychology is often perceived as additive rather than essential. Helpful, but not strictly necessary. After all, a leader can read a book, attend a workshop, or hire a coach without formal training in I/O psychology and still improve.

The challenge, then, is not proving that these topics matter, but articulating what I/O psychology uniquely contributes beyond intuition, experience, or self-study — and why that contribution justifies time, trust, and investment.

How do you sell it?

When I think about how I/O psychology is sold, I keep coming back to two organizational scenarios, and both expose a problem.

The first is the organization that's already doing well. In theory, this should be fertile ground for I/O work — with stable revenue, time, and resources, leaders should be more open to investing in understanding their workforce, optimizing systems, and moving from good to great. But the obvious question quickly follows: if things are working, why bring in an I/O psychologist at all? This is where practitioners often position themselves as value-adds — helping organizations operate more efficiently, increase effectiveness, or build resilience to change. All legitimate outcomes. But they rely on a belief that improvement is worth investing in even when nothing is visibly broken.

The second scenario is the opposite: organizations that are struggling. Here, the response is usually more blunt — how can we afford consultants when we're barely staying afloat? Selling anything into scarcity is difficult. In these contexts, I/O psychologists often lean on diagnostic tools, assessments, and evidence-based frameworks to identify what's going wrong and how to fix it. This approach can, and often does, create real value. However, none of this is new. What stands out to me is the disconnect between what I/O psychologists can do and how the work is often delivered in practice.

Capability vs. consulting theater

I/O psychology is rich with statistical methods, validated tools, and decades of research that can meaningfully improve how organizations function. Yet much of what organizations experience instead looks like something else entirely: an obsession with frameworks, neatly packaged slide decks, and months of meetings to categorize information the organization largely already knows.

Frameworks are not inherently bad — they can be useful sense-making tools. But when it takes four months to re-label known problems without materially changing outcomes, the work starts to feel arbitrary.

Kevin O'Leary's blunt question captures this tension well: how do I make money? Whether we like it or not, that is often the primary concern of the organizations hiring us. When I/O services are wrapped in vague language, excessive process, or corporate polish, they risk being perceived as fluff — regardless of how rigorous the underlying science actually is.

Where the responsibility falls

This is where the problem becomes uncomfortable, because it doesn't sit with organizations. It sits with us.

If selling I/O psychology is difficult in both abundance and scarcity, then the issue may not be market conditions. It's how we communicate our value. Some questions I keep coming back to: how do we clearly articulate the value of our work, regardless of an organization's current state? How do we more directly connect research, diagnostics, and interventions to bottom-line outcomes? What is our actual superpower — the thing an I/O psychologist can do that a generalist MBA consultant cannot?

Until those questions are answered convincingly, I/O psychology risks continuing to be seen as thoughtful, rigorous, and well-intentioned — but ultimately optional.

The I/O Psychology Collective

The purpose of this project is to try to address these issues directly and imperfectly. What feels most frustrating isn't a lack of capability — it's the layers of politics, outdated infrastructure, closed systems, and unnecessary red tape that make the field harder to access, harder to understand, and harder to evolve.

The I/O Psychology Collective is an attempt to create something simpler. This is not meant to be another professional organization with membership fees, paywalled resources, or mandatory credentials. It's meant to be a space where I/O psychologists and adjacent professionals — researchers, practitioners, consultants, business owners, and stakeholders — can share insight openly and learn from one another without gatekeeping.

The goal is to provide free, practical value: resources, writing, tools, perspectives, tactics, and honest conversations about what it actually means to work in and around I/O psychology today. No required memberships. No certification ladders. No performative professionalism.

This isn't meant to replace existing institutions or speak on behalf of the field. It exists to fill the space those institutions don't — where ideas can be tested in public, where practitioners can talk honestly about what works and what doesn't, and where the field can be examined without needing permission. If I/O psychology is going to mature into something more coherent, more accessible, and more necessary, that work has to happen in the open.

> *As I write this, I don't have a fully defined roadmap. What I do have is a clear intention. The goal is simple: to make I/O psychology easier to understand, easier to practice, and harder to dismiss.*

Welcome to the I/O Psychology Collective.
