

Bridging the Divide: I-O Psychology and Organized Labor

Advancing Worker Wellbeing and Organizational Effectiveness
through Institutional Partnership



*Based on the comprehensive critique and analysis of the century-long
schism between the profession and labor movements.*

Reconciliation is both a scientific imperative and an ethical obligation

Core Thesis

I-O psychology has systematically neglected organized labor for over a century, constraining our understanding of workplace power and limiting our contribution to wellbeing.



The Diagnosis

The field's alignment with management interests has created blind spots regarding collective voice, conflict, and governance.



The Consequence

We maximize individual "voice" (surveys) while ignoring the mechanisms that actually secure safety and wages (unions), leading to hollow wellbeing commitments.

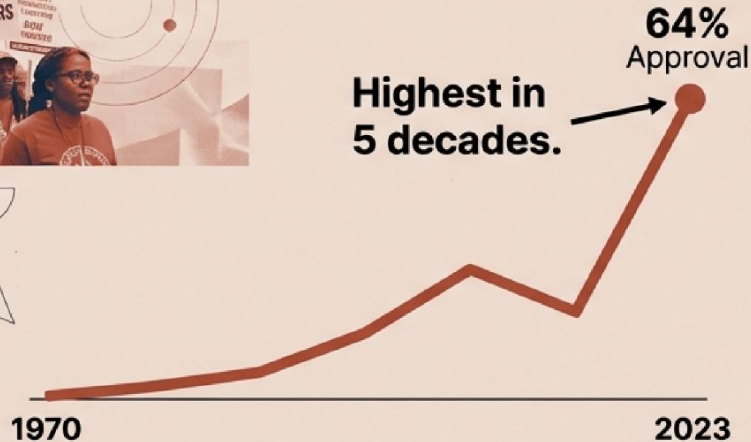


The Path Forward

A shift toward "Partnership Research," "Integrative Bargaining Support," and "Democratic Governance" offers a way to reclaim the field's relevance and integrity.

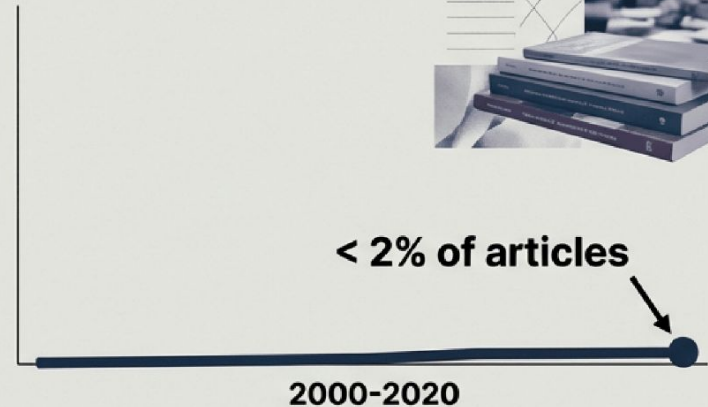
The profession is silent during a fundamental shift in workplace relations

The World (Public Sentiment)



- Surge in interest among workers <35
- Organizing drives at Amazon, Starbucks, Apple

The Field (Academic Literature)



In flagship journals (JAP, Personnel Psych)



Key Insight: While society debates the future of work and power, I-O psychology treats unions as “contextual moderators” or nuisance variables rather than central stakeholders.



The divide originates from a century of “Management Alignment”



1910s-1920s: The Origins

Early industrial psychologists aligned with efficiency movements explicitly opposed to collective bargaining. Hugo Münsterberg consulted on anti-union strategies; experts testified that collective action was “psychologically primitive.”



Post-WWII: The Solidification

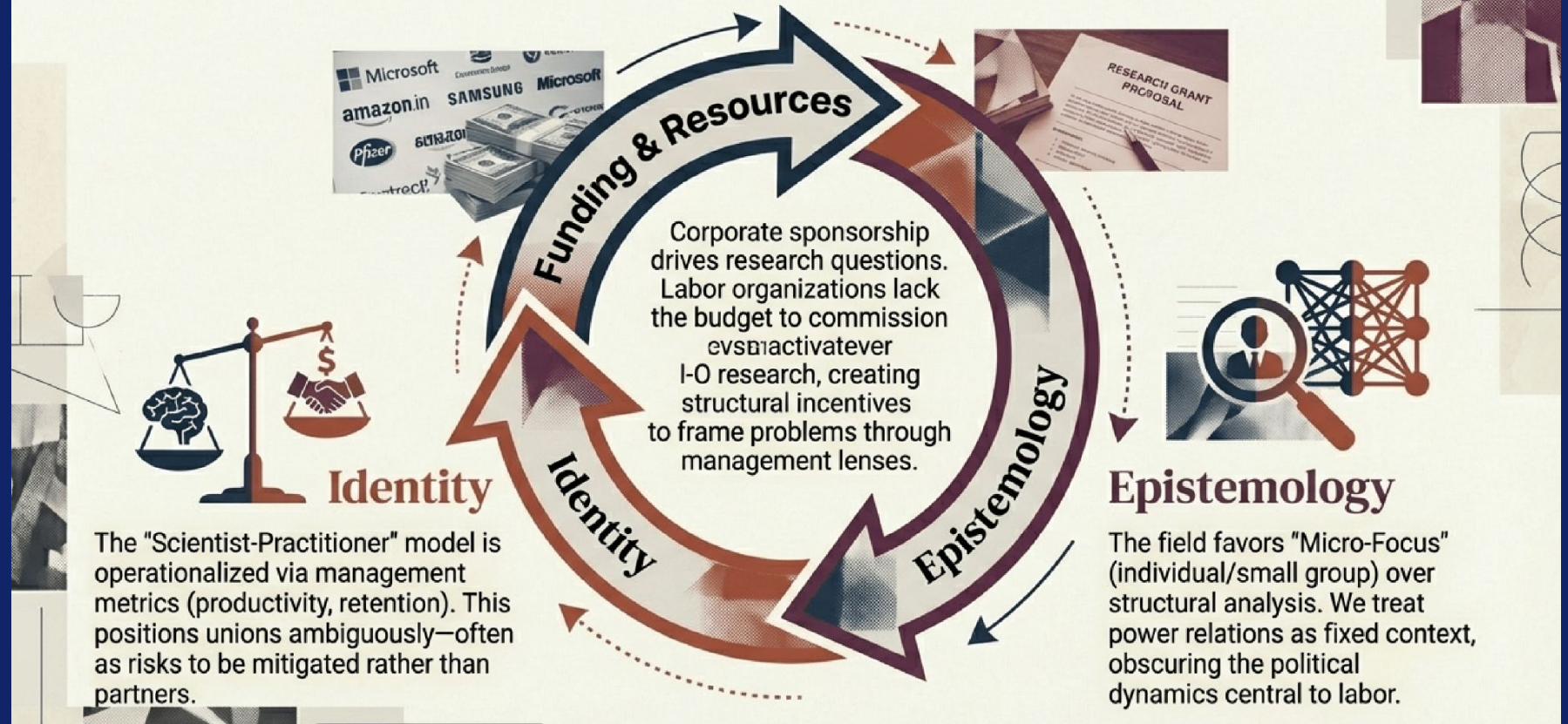
The field moved into business schools, adopting “Unitarist” models—assuming management and worker interests are identical. Unions viewed as impediments to efficiency.



Present Day: The Legacy

Fewer than 15% of doctoral programs include labor relations coursework. Most practitioners have zero training in union contexts.

Three systemic barriers sustain the separation



Ignoring collective voice creates organizational blind spots

	Individual Voice (I-O Focus)	Collective Voice (Labor Reality)
Mechanisms	Suggestion boxes & engagement surveys.	Grievance procedures & bargaining.
Scope	Incremental improvements. 	Challenging fundamental power asymmetries.
Limitation	High risk of retaliation for raising high-stakes issues.	Due process protections. 

The Conflict Fallacy

Mainstream I-O views conflict as dysfunctional (a "bug" to fix). Labor relations views conflict as inherent (a feature of diverging interests).

Impact: Suppressing legitimate conflict creates dysfunction. Organizations miss the "Monopoly Face" (bargaining power) and "Collective Voice Face" (justice) of unions.

True worker wellbeing requires structural power, not just resilience training

Wage Premium



Union membership yields a 10-15% wage premium, with even larger effects for women and POC (compressing inequality).

Safety & COVID-19



Safety & COVID-19

Unionized workers secured superior PPE and safety protocols during the pandemic. I-O focused on "stress management" while unions addressed the **source** of the danger.

Job Security



Job Security

Unions provide due process that individual performance cannot guarantee.

"I-O psychology's silence on collective representation leaves the profession's commitments to employee wellbeing sounding hollow."

A new model for engagement: From estrangement to partnership



Moving from Critique to Construction

Co-production: Researching *with* workers, not just *on* them

Case Study: Kaiser Permanente Labor Management Partnership

- **Context:** 1997 partnership with 85,000 workers.
- **Method:** "Unit-Based Teams" of frontline workers and managers solving problems together.
- **Role of Science:** Researchers acted as neutral facilitators, using jointly developed metrics for performance and worker experience.



Principles for Practitioners

- ✓ **Joint Steering Committees:** Both sides define the research questions.
- ✓ **Worker-Centered Metrics:** Measuring what matters to employees, not just management KPIs.
- ✓ **Data Transparency:** Results shared simultaneously with all parties (no proprietary management access).

Shifting collective bargaining from adversarial to integrative.

The I-O Role in the Negotiation Lifecycle

Phase 1: Pre-Negotiation

Trust-building interventions and "Interest-Based Bargaining" training (identifying underlying interests vs. surface positions).



Phase 2: During Negotiation

Neutral data analysis.

Providing objective facts on compensation benchmarks to reduce information asymmetry.



Phase 3: Implementation

Designing joint committees to interpret contract language.



Example: AT&T and CWA (Communications Workers of America) using neutral facilitators to navigate impasses.

Supporting democratic governance and informed choice

Comparative Models

- Codetermination (Europe): Worker reps on boards correlate with longer-term strategy and training investment.

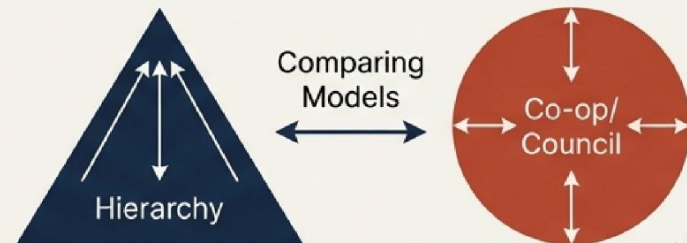


- Employee Ownership (Mondragon/John Lewis): Psychologists support worker councils by training reps in financial literacy and strategic decision-making.



The Organizing Context

- I-O role is Neutral Decision Support
- Facilitating “Informed Choice” during union drives (deliberative forums) rather than aiding “Union Avoidance.”
- Analogy: Similar to “informed consent” in medical decision-making.

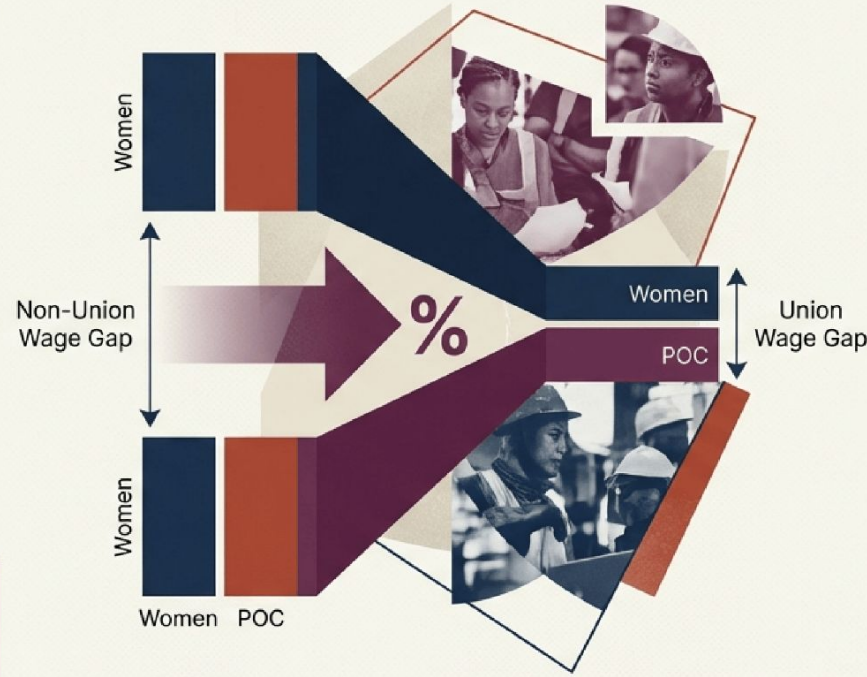


Collective bargaining is a proven engine for intersectional equity

- **Unions** compress racial and gender wage gaps more effectively than individual negotiation.



- **Case Study (SEIU):** Healthcare contracts include stronger anti-discrimination language and harassment reporting procedures than non-union equivalents.



- **The Shift:** Moving from individual "Diversity Training" (low impact) to structural "Contract Protections" (high impact).



- **Action:** Partner with unions representing marginalized workforces (women, immigrants) to study equity outcomes.



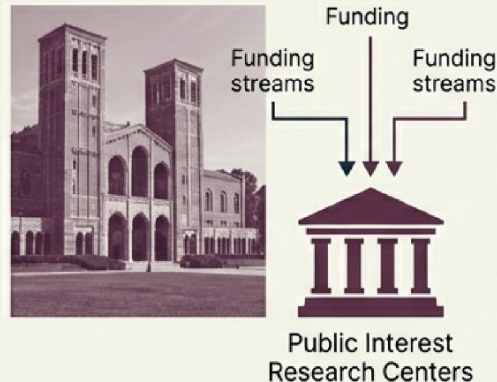
Reforming the profession to build long-term capacity

Education



Integrate labor relations into graduate curriculum (history, law, bargaining). Internships with labor orgs, not just HR depts.

Infrastructure



Create "Public Interest Research Centers" (e.g., Cornell, UCLA models) to diversify funding beyond corporate sponsorship.

Ethics



Revise codes to address power asymmetry. Require transparency about who the psychologist represents (management vs. workers) in contested spaces.

Actionable steps for Monday morning



For Researchers



Include union status as a central variable, not a control.



Seek “participatory research” grants (e.g., NSF Future of Work) requiring worker sign-off.



For Practitioners



Assess if your “voice” interventions (surveys) are masking structural issues.



Proposal neutral facilitation for labor-management committees.



For Educators



Add a module on “Labor History & Collective Bargaining” to next semester’s syllabus.



Invite labor leaders to guest lecture alongside HR directors.

A Call to Action

We cannot claim to maximize organizational effectiveness while ignoring the institutions that govern it. We cannot claim to champion champiog wellbeing while ignoring the primary mechanism workers use to secure it.

The rising generation of workers seeking collective representation offers an invitation—one that I-O psychology can no longer afford to ignore.