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**COMMENTARY**

# Does the antiwork perspective contribute to understanding and improving the nature of work?

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I agree with virtually all of the Alliger and McEachern (2024) criticisms of the work world, as well as their many suggestions regarding research and practice, because (a) they are embedded in theoretically grounded empirical findings; (b) their aim is to create more humane workplaces; and (c) they call for industrial and organizational (I-O) psychology to accept some responsibility for current conditions and to play a role in implementing such changes. But none of that seems to depend on accepting the ideology of antiwork. The focal article could have been written without mentioning antiwork—and it would nevertheless have been as valuable as it currently is (albeit not nearly so provocative). Therefore, to what extent is that perspective helpful, and might it be harmful?

Antiwork is a "multifaceted, negative appraisal of work (i.e., the tradition of paid employment) *in and of itself*" (ms. p. 4).[1] Indeed, the 18 tenets that summarize the perspective are almost unremittingly awful (work demands submission; is tedious and boring most of the time; intentionally made to be meaningless; is exploitative; if experienced as engaging, it's due to management's manipulation of workers; et al.). "The topics under its umbrella relate to the toxic qualities of work . . . . The central and most defining [construct] is that work inevitably demands submission of the will . . . . a kind of coercion inevitably operates in employing organizations" (ms., pp. 6, 7). This pertains to all classes, types, and levels of jobs. Moreover, it is viewed "as a totalizing, framing philosophy [that] would seem to have implications for most everything within the purview of I-O" (ms., p. 10).

Alliger and McEachern pose the central question, "is work itself inherently damaging to well-being and life satisfaction" (ms., p. 5).[2] But rather than "examin[ing] the actual reality that this question premises," reality is tautologically framed by the perspective that assumes the answer to be an unequivocal and "totalizing" yes! The reasonable question regarding whether the antiwork perspective might be useful [along with others] is subverted by using that pessimistic framework to define and explain all the exemplars (e.g., surveillance; counterproductive work behavior).

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[1]Although part way through the essay the focus seems to shift from work in general to the "inherently oppressive, deforming nature of the employment relationship" and the "power dynamics between employee and employer" (ms., p. 10). Though more limited in focus, such specificity seems a potentially more fruitful approach.

[2]It can be noted in passing that other critical theorists view other factors in the global economic system as the major threat to human flourishing and social welfare, such as the reliance on financial incentives (Friedland & Cole, 2019).

## Conceptual ambiguity of antiwork

### *The meaning of coercion*

In what sense is (all) work (inherently, unambiguously, completely) coercive, and what does that mean? Even when work is experienced as engaging and rewarding, the authors tell us that is entirely due to invidious managerial manipulation. One might just as well bemoan that because of the indispensable need for air, food, water, shelter, and companionship, life itself is coercive. So what? And eons before coercive corporations and management structures were invented, hunters, gatherers, and subsistence farmers had to *work*. Is coercion a meaningful way to understand the work of symphony musicians who are "controlled" by composers' scores, "submissive" to conductors' artistic idiosyncrasies, and constrained by the other musicians?[3] And mightn't merely abiding by adaptive, mundane, societal norms also be viewed as coercive (driving on the correct side of the road, responding "hello" when greeted by an acquaintance, crossing at the green light, holding the door open for an old person)? Is coercion really the most accurate characterization of the societal dynamics at play? Elsewhere, Alliger (2022) seems to answer in the affirmative when he observes that "smiling is a kind of limiting case on the soft end of things . . . . It is, after all, an example of 'emotional labor'" (p. 43).

This is not to deny that there is much coercion in the world of commerce. How much input did you have into the terms of the contract you "willingly" signed with your internet service provider or telephone and credit card companies? Even professional I-O psychologists report that 30% of the ethical dilemmas they recently experienced involved coercion (Lefkowitz & Watts, 2022). The adverse effects of a corporatist value system ("managerialism" in the terms of the focal article) on society overall, and on the science and practice of I-O psychology, have been noted within the field for some time (Herzberg, 1966; Lefkowitz, 1990). In fact, that is also true for virtually all of the research topics noted in the focal article (cf. Table 2); they were not "inspired" by antiwork (ms. p. 63).

At the very least we need to differentiate among (a) the psychological experience of feeling coerced, (b) an operational definition of overtly coercive behavior or social systems, and (c) a social scientist's "negative *appraisal* of [coercive] work" (ms. p. 4). Is coercion, as used in antiwork, an objectively verifiable condition, an internal emotional state, or merely an observer's ideological judgment (i.e., a "totalizing, framing philosophy")—or some combination? For example, in the surveys of I-O psychologists noted above, coercion was defined as "being subject to external pressures to violate one's ethical or professional standards or legal requirements" (Lefkowitz, 2021, p. 305). That is, there is an implicit or explicit threat of dire consequences if one does [not] do as pressured. It is invariably experienced as noxious, whereas work can be rewarding and even joyful for many people in some instances (unless one assumes that they are invariably being duped). The issue is similar to the distinction that I-O psychologists fail to make between *perceived* organizational justice (usually, the procedural or interactional aspects) as opposed to the actual *conditions* that comprise an a priori definition of (distributive) justice (Lefkowitz, 2009). In contrast, the antiwork perspective emphasizes that "workers are entering a state of submission simply by entering any business at all where they are not the boss" (Alliger, 2022, p. 45).[4] Does that mean, conversely, that individual entrepreneurs cannot be "coerced" by the demands of running their business, meeting payroll, abiding by ethical norms, paying taxes, and so forth?

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[3]In an incredible and ironic coincidence, the day after I wrote those words it was reported that a famous conductor, in partially walking back his apology for having abused a performer, said "The way an orchestra is set up is undemocratic. Someone needs to be in charge" (Hernández, 2023, C3).

[4]Presumably, it would make no difference if it were a corporation in which workers hold a substantial ownership position with significant governance authority.

### *Noxious work*

It is not necessarily a bad thing to formulate the tenets of antiwork in a "somewhat overstated or even hyperbolic . . . . and even over-the-top" manner in order to "define the essential character of [the] topic" (Alliger & McEachern, 2024, ms. p. 7). However, by misattributing all of the toxicity (coercion, submission) unconditionally to work per se (as well as by failing to distinguish among external conditions, internal experience, and interpretive judgments), it could misdirect research and lead to inadequate and/or incorrect solutions. Why would one even strive to promote worker dignity if work itself inherently precluded it and the workers are simply delusional in any event?

As I-O psychologists have long been aware, in any given situation, many different aspects of work may be among the organizational attributes or other conditions contributing to coercion, dissatisfaction, burnout, conflict, turnover, poor performance, and all the other possible adverse effects with which we may be concerned. Yes, some jobs are terrible, but they may not be entirely terrible; and some jobs are not at all terrible. Some organizations are toxic, but not all are toxic; they vary in the degree and nature of their toxicity. Some jobs and organizations actually are fulfilling, challenging, and rewarding—to varying degrees and in various ways. As empirically grounded social scientists, I-O psychologists have devoted much of the 100 years or so of our existence investigating the positive and negative effects of particular features of jobs and organizations. A blanket indictment of work in general could distract us from "examining the actual reality" of work in all its manifestations. Recent surveys in the US have corroborated considerable variation in both positive and adverse experiences of work, related to a variety of factors (American Psychological Association, 2023; U.S. Public Health Service, 2022).

This commentary should not be misconstrued as viewing the work world through rose-colored safety goggles. For many years indictments have been offered of the toxic effects on workers of free-enterprise capitalism, the natural rights theory on which it is based, unjust corporate power as exemplified by employment at will and forced arbitration; the neoliberal exacerbation of those effects; the distortions of managerial power-aggrandizement; as well as the indifference and even accommodation to it all by I-O psychology (e.g., Frederick, 1995; Lefkowitz, 1990, 2008, 2019, 2023a).

It may be that Alliger and McEachern implicitly recognize the utility of some of these criticisms. After emphasizing work's putative "totalizing . . . . inherent coerciveness," they present a marvelous compendium of recommendations for research and professional practice, focusing on *specific job/work/employee attributes.* Moreover, these recommendations are aimed at "improving . . . working lives" (ms., p. 29). (Although one is left to surmise how improvement is possible if work is inherently and totally toxic.)

All the specific attributes comprising the proposed research and practice agenda are introduced and discussed from the negative, pessimistic perspective of antiwork ideology. But almost all of them have been studied by I-O psychologists for many years, before the coinage of "antiwork." It suggests a paradox: How could a profession be devoted to improving organizations and making employees' work lives better if its adherents believe that work itself is totally, inherently—and presumably irrevocably—awful? Doesn't it logically suggest that the only possible means of "improvement" would be abolishing work, which Alliger and McEachern indeed inform us has been suggested. Pursuing that as a genuine practical plan seems beyond consideration, here.

### Conclusion

This criticism of antiwork ideology is not a blanket defense of organizations nor an attempt to negate the noxious aspects of many jobs. One likes to believe that one is not naïve, particularly ignorant, nor blind to the evils perpetrated by many companies much of the time. For example: "I-O psychology and business enterprises are moral institutions—meaning that they benefit from being part of the moral community and should be held accountable for their moral failings . . . .

business organizations are sometimes (perhaps often) unhealthy, ego-dystonic places in which to work" (Lefkowitz, 2019, pp. 475, 476; cf. also Lefkowitz, 2012b). Moreover, I have rather persistently (some might opine, tediously) been criticizing I-O psychology for its apparent blindness to excesses reflected in our own corporatist values—with often unacknowledged adverse consequences for both our science and practice (Lefkowitz, 2011, 2012a, 2013, 2014).

### Inhumane work and humanistic I-O psychology

The metamessage of the focal article is in accord with positions advocated as a values transformation to a more humanistic I-O psychology (Lefkowitz, 2012b, 2023a, 2023b). Indeed, much could be gained by replacing the term "antiwork" with *inhumane work* or, even better, *inhumane aspects* of work, which characterizes the concerns of some critical theorists while reflecting the actual structure of jobs. This would also direct attention beyond our usual concerns for "science and practice" to the third dimension of any profession such as I-O psychology: its normative or moral stance in the world regarding human well-being. This is at least as important as our science and practice because a profession's values largely determine the nature of its science and practice: "It is a profession's values that determine its goals and self-construed duties, responsibilities, and ethical standards, its response to sociopolitical events that affect it (e.g., civil rights legislation; rampant downsizing), and the choices made by its members concerning where they work, what they study, and the criteria by which they evaluate that work" (Lefkowitz, 2008, p. 440; cf. also Lefkowitz, 2009, 2011, 2012a, 2013).

The objective of this focal article is to further I-O psychology's contribution to advancing the well-being of workers. But the essay emphasizes solely "ideas for I-O research and practice" (ms., p. 39), with the normative values position only implicit. Moreover, that value position is not especially salient in the profession generally. Consequently, a clear statement of I-O's moral position in that regard would be a valuable addition. This is an example of such a statement that is in accord with the aims of the focal article:

> *Along with improving the effective functioning of organizations, a fundamental objective of research and practice in industrial-organizational psychology should be to assure that organizations are safe, just, healthy, challenging, and fulfilling places in which to work . . . . when it is anticipated that actions undertaken to improve organizational effectiveness will adversely impact the well-being of employees or other organizational stakeholders, the appropriate role of the I-O psychologist is to challenge the morality, wisdom and necessity of those actions and, if necessary, to attenuate their adverse consequences to the extent feasible.* (Lefkowitz, 2023a, p. 418).

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