

COMMENTARY

From antiwork to disorganizational psychology

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Although antiwork finally receives its due by Alliger and McEachern (2024), their focal article remains remarkably if not suspiciously organizational in both tone and substance. Indeed, the “O” in our professional moniker appears to wield its stubborn dominance, carrying on as business as usual in an otherwise radical challenge to our field. What, then, would not just an antiwork but *disorganizational* psychology look like? And is there any merit to thinking through what the latter might offer industrial and organizational (I-O) psychologists?

It bears mentioning at the outset that disorganizational is not anti-organizational. If the prefix “anti” is intended to convey a bonafide stance against, “dis” conveys a pulling apart, undoing, or tearing asunder. Therefore, in a strictly grammatical sense, an allegiance to anti-organizational psychology would be part and parcel to an allegiance to antiwork, especially insofar as work today is largely conducted in organizations. Disorganization, by contrast, is not so much a call to fundamentally reconceive what we study “out there” but “in here,” which is to say that perhaps there’s merit to examining what we ignore or give up—in ourselves—when we succumb to the unthinking tendency to organize.

For better or worse, virtually all academic disciplines take part in a conceptual tidying up of a complex and often messy world. But it becomes a peculiar occupational hazard of I-O psychologists, even critical ones, when this tendency eclipses more thoroughgoing reflection on how, and why, we work the way we do. The irony is not lost on me, for example, that for a focal article wanting to make the case for antiwork, presenting a rather lengthy outline of future research and practice entails a lot of future work! To be fair, I suspect the article’s drift into familiar I-O territory by calling for the operationalization of concepts, the examination of antecedents, outcomes, and the like, is partly intended to lower the typical reader’s blood pressure (i.e., by making antiwork look “rigorous” and thus worthy of study). But it also begs the question of why we’ve come to believe that the legitimacy of our ideas rests solely on this kind of presentation (this norm of organization), and more questionable still, on an uncontested image of ourselves as tidy, and thus, sober, serious, and “rigorous” professionals. If the ethos of antiwork gets lost a bit in Alliger and McEachern’s presentation, this also speaks to a rather pernicious way of working in I-O psychology that may limit us as much as it distinguishes us.

Elsewhere, inroads into the disorganized aspects of our lives have been made by the now antiquated and allegedly unscientific branch of psychology known as psychoanalysis. It is here where we find Freud’s signature idea of the unconscious, which ensures that we never fully arrive at an organized sense of ourselves, and to think so is merely a fiction we tell to cover over a deeper strangeness (stranger still, the genre of fiction is often better at conveying this disorganization than any scholarly discipline, including psychoanalysis). Simply put, no one is fully who they think they are. And just when we think we have arrived at a sense of ourselves, we are undermined. It is from this vantage where a disorganizational psychology might offset, or even push back against, the

arguments laid out by Alliger and McEachern. If, for example, “antiwork . . . holds that individual autonomy is an end in itself” (p. 8), disorganization holds that autonomy is a fraught enterprise, forever destabilized by the radical alterity of the unconscious.

For Freud (1908a), the sheer fact that we all possess an unconscious entails a blurring of the distinction between normal and neurotic. In I-O, it might invite a similar blurring between organization and disorganization. Or even more provocatively, if we follow Freud’s (1908b) notion of reaction formation, it might invite us to examine what lies beneath our tidy presentation of ideas; in this case, the considerable unconscious “work” of maintaining the cover story of organization. A disorganizational psychology might therefore ask what the siphoning of our thinking on antiwork into the conceptual frameworks of I-O functions conceals or defends against.

Notice, as well, how a disorganizational psychology might open up other intriguing connections with antiwork. Could it be, for instance, that our desire for antiwork is because we cling too much to the fiction of organization, which in turn renders work something we not just doubt but at times despise? A dialectical exercise might begin by pondering what excites us to work, or what makes us see work as precisely the only thing we can imagine doing in a given moment. One answer, I would wager, is when we are chasing something in a disorganized manner, unburdened by the injunction to work (I think of play here). On this score, it may be that we can only celebrate the virtues of antiwork by allowing ourselves the leisure of disorganization. A simple word for this might be allowing for *pleasure*, which then begs the disturbing question: Have we lost the capacity for pleasure in our work as I-O psychologists?

There is, of course, a long intellectual tradition of celebrating, and at times romanticizing, the pleasurable dimension of human life relative to a soul-stifling working world (a tradition that also informs contemporary theorists of antiwork). The Freudian-Marxist and Frankfurt School theorist Herbert Marcuse (1955), for instance, frames the unconscious as that which is not, and never can be, fully aligned with what he calls late capitalism’s “performance principle.” Immersing ourselves in this tradition as I-O psychologists may be a start to entertaining a disorganizational psychology (so, too, may reading fiction or poetry). Most important is the acknowledgement this is likely to bring of a constitutionally disorganized subjectivity at the root of who we are, and thus—precisely because this is a facet of our shared psychology—warrants our attention as I-O psychologists. If I were pressed to assert a maxim for disorganizational psychology here, I would say it is a call to live in dialectical relation with the disorganized aspects of ourselves—in and *as* a form of work.

I shall end with a brief comment on ethics and what I take to be the moral import of both antiwork and disorganizational psychology. If seemingly the most thoughtful form of ethics we have thus far conceived in I-O is normative and rooted in humanistic or humanitarian values (Lefkowitz, 2017), then antiwork invites a conversation about fostering not just humane or “good” work, but freedom from work, and therefore imagining an I-O profession that deflates work’s existential and symbolic significance. Intriguingly, it may even entail working ourselves out of a job. But even this important addendum to the normative view of ethics still seems to take “normal” for granted. What if, instead, it were more true of human beings that we are deeply conflicted over our values—even the most humanistic and humanitarian ones—and if we’re being honest, we struggle not so much with the pangs of failing to live up to our mores but with our contradictions and nonsensicality, our occasional asociality and proneness to destruction, and above all our strangeness that haunts even the most idealized image of ourselves? Normativity flies in the face of this disorganized subjectivity and instead naively assumes that what’s troubling is the wider working world (or our ideological complicity with it) as opposed to our very constitution as reflexive beings.

If taking up a stance (and thus a stand) of antiwork is a straightforwardly ethical act, acknowledging our disorganization is less certain but no less ethical. What we lose in knowing

what we should do, we gain in humility, the capacity for surprise, and dare I say pleasure. It is in this space where antiwork and disorganization might begin to merge and invite something refreshingly different in I-O psychology.

References

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