Creating decent work for all

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Up until very recently, psychology's contribution to humanitarian work has been insufficient and modest. **Humanitarian work psychology** presents a new speciality within the field of Industrial and Organisational (I/O) psychology that focuses on humanitarian work. The book provides compelling arguments for organising humanitarian work to meet humanitarian ends. Humanitarian work psychology is the application of I/O psychology to humanitarian issues with a specific focus on developing a psychology that promotes humanitarian work. From both an ethical and practical perspective, humanitarian work psychology promotes humanistic as well as humanitarian ends including the United Nations Millennium Development Goal of reducing world poverty by 50% by 2015 (Annan, 2000). Humanitarian work psychology is in every way invested in the promotion, creation and maintenance of decent work for all.

The rationale behind this specialisation is the fact that despite major advances in human society, the world continues to face humanitarian crises. These crises include war, starvation and poverty, climate change, and among other things, natural and human-made disasters. First world, economically powerful nations are often better prepared to contain and deal with many of these crises successfully, but not always. *Organisations* (non-government organisations) are placed at the forefront of managing such humanitarian issues. And so, it makes sense to ensure, as in the case of any organisation, that humanitarian organisations have the requisite organisational support structures for successful operation, as well as the successful performance of its workers. There is a need to recognise that organisations have a great capacity to advance humanitarian goals. I/O psychology, given its well established research base and practice of developing effective organisations, is argued as being central in achieving humanitarian ends.

The authors of this book opine that humanitarian work psychology still has a substantive contribution to make towards what is already available and known in the area. Work psychology has historically delved into the arena of humanitarian issues. Previous attempts were not sufficient in creating any lasting profile for psychology in development work. The authors make a clear distinction between a psychology of humanitarian work and a work psychology that is humanitarian. Regarding the former, most of the literature and research in the area tends to focus on aid worker wellbeing with the view that a lack of wellbeing is due to organisational, rather than, humanitarian related stressors. The latter, a work psychology that is humanitarian, focuses on the promotion of a more humanitarian perspective within work in general, specifically on ensuring decent work for all workers. Humanitarian work psychology has its key focus here: it is concerned with developing and maintaining decent work.

Against this backdrop, the book is divided into three parts which include Conceptual Foundations (part I), Applications (part II) and Building Capacity (part III).

Part I of the book provides the conceptual basis for humanitarian work psychology, its history, theory, method and ethics. Riechman and Berry (Chapter 2: The evolution of Industrial and Organisational Psychology) present I/O psychology as the foundation stone of humanitarian work psychology. They provide an excellent review of the history of I/O psychology and emphasise its evolution as it relates to the development of humanitarian work psychology. The main arguments presented in the introductory chapters (part I) emphasise that in order for humanitarian work psychology to develop an identity of its own and grow into a speciality, it has to not only depend on what I/O psychology has to offer, but widen its perspective and develop its own value systems. This is an important point to consider in that attention must be paid to humanitarian work psychology developing a broader proficiency that draws from disciplines outside of I/O psychology.

While reading the section on the conceptual foundations, I was drawn to a key piece of writing by Pietersen (2005) who argues that Industrial/Organisational psychology, particularly in the case of South Africa needs a considerable amount of published research in the narrative-interpretive, philosophical and interventionist modes of understanding of human behaviour in the work and organisational context. To achieve this, he argues, will be an appreciation for relevant perspectives, ideas, methods and solutions from other knowledge disciplines such as sociology and anthropology. Thus, despite the strong arguments for using I/O psychology as a foundation for humanitarian work psychology, there also needs to be an appreciation for the fact the I/O psychology itself faces identity crises, often shifting away from mainstream psychology. Furthermore, there is also a need for I/O psychology to regularly consider its applicability in localised contexts.

This idea of local context is driven throughout the text in arguments for developing cultural competence. Lefkowitz (Chapter 5: From humanitarian to humanistic work psychology: The morality of business) suggests that we should endeavour to develop an expanded normative model of work psychology characterised by humanistic values. Similarly, in their paper, "Motivating the teacher workforce in Uganda" (Chapter 7), Tumwebaze & MacLachlan outline many factors which contribute to social, cultural and economic development. Of particular importance, they comment on the *ubuntu* philosophy which emphasises, unlike in Western cultures, the idea of collectivism – again highlighting the need for developing cultural competence. This idea is carried through in many of the chapters throughout part II and III of the book.

Part II of the book deals with a range of *applications.* For example, enhancing public services in health and education. These applications are in response to the United Nations Millennium Development Goals and the urgent need to develop and sustain decent work for all.

Part III of the book deals with *building capacity* with a particular focus on future directions. Schein (Chapter 11: Women, work and poverty: Reflection on research for social change) emphasises the need for humanitarian work psychology to focus on issues of women, work and poverty. Interestingly, Schein writes that I/O psychology itself has been unable to make a sufficient contribution to these issues and that humanitarian work psychology needs to expand its foci. Schein makes an argument for social advocacy research in achieving this.

Atkins and Thompson (Chapter 12: Online volunteers and SmartAid) considers how the use of information technology and I/O psychology can improve the effectiveness and wellbeing of those both receiving and delivering aid and discuses both the trends and opportunities in online volunteerism. A programme (still under development), called SmartAid, aims to become a tool that looks at an alignment between a person, a job, and a recipient that has an appreciation for local contexts.

Gloss, Glavey and Godbout (Chapter 13: Building digital bridges: the digital divide and humanitarian work psychology's online networks) acknowledge the central role that the internet plays in the work of humanitarian work psychologists, particularly through the use on online networks and communities. For continued success, these online systems need to be made accessible to people from various income brackets, thus moving beyond the digital divide. Moving forward, efforts must be made to create meaningful digital bridges – the authors provide a set of recommendations to do so.

At the heart of the argument and a key feature of this book lies in the conceptual grounding of humanitarian work psychology and the very real contribution that I/O psychology can make to humanitarian work psychology. I/O psychology has heavily informed, ethically, practically and otherwise, humanitarian work psychology. The development of cultural competence is a key idea that runs throughout many chapters of the book. Humanitarian work is concerned with the development of decent work in all places of work where efforts must suit the local needs/context. Despite its many successes, the book also highlights many of the gaps that still exist in the research and practice of humanitarian work psychology in its efforts to enhance human welfare.

References

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