

# Critical positions: Situating critical perspectives in work and organizational psychology

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## Abstract

This paper argues that critical perspectives have constituted a marginal yet continued presence in work and organizational (W-O) psychology and calls for a reflexive taking stock of these perspectives to ground a critical research agenda. We argue that critical W-O psychology has been positioned between a psychology literature with limited development of critical perspectives, and an emergent critical management literature that has allowed their selective development. This in-between position has allowed critical W-O psychology to persist, albeit in a fragmented form, while limiting its potential for theoretical and applied impact. We use this diagnosis to reflect on how critical perspectives can best develop from within W-O psychology. We end with a call for developing a critical movement unique to the current historical moment, drawing upon without repeating the experiences of its home disciplines, in a future oriented and reflexive psychology research agenda.

## Keywords

work and organizational psychology, critical psychology, disciplinary perspectives in psychology

*...to insist upon a world with room in it for fruitful work and love. Merely that.*

Cavell (1979, p. 85)

The desire to understand and contribute to the lives of people in and around organizations is an important motivation for many work and

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organizational (W-O) psychologists (Reichman, 2014). For many researchers, including ourselves, psychology's focus on human experience within the socio-political contexts of work promises a broad, socially conscious domain of inquiry (Dejours & Deranty, 2010; Islam, 2020). To realize this promise, many W-O psychologists have felt drawn to perspectives that have come to be called "critical" (e.g., Axel, 2009; Bal et al., 2019; Islam & Zyphur, 2006; McDonald & Bubna-Litic, 2017; Weber, Höge, & Hornung, 2020). While this term introduces definitional and conceptual challenges, it expresses the experiences of unease often felt by psychologists as they are socialized into their field and the hope that different ways of imagining W-O psychology are possible. Practically, psychologists may come to question whether their work serves more to control working people's behavior than to help them flourish, and aspire to centralize the interests of less-powerful groups in the research process (Sugarman, 2005). Methodologically, they may be frustrated by demands to truncate complex human experiences into simplified constructs and measurements, desiring instead to harness diverse methodologies and resist pressures to translate their constructs into monetary terms (Islam, 2021). Socially, they may feel constrained to frame social, economic and political dynamics as matters of individual cognition, affect and behavior, obscuring rather than clarifying the sources of worker experience and limiting alternatives to the organizational status quo (Christopher & Hickinbottom, 2008). As W-O psychologists confront such experiences, they may discount them and learn to adapt to what they feel are required academic and applied norms. They may reject the "psychologization" of work and regard W-O psychology as a misguided turn away from the social (Godard, 2014). Alternatively, they may engage in critical dialogue from within W-O psychology with the belief that their experiences have broader resonance and can promote reflexivity within the field. It is in this latter sense of constructive engagement that the

current paper sets out to position the project of critical W-O psychology.

In setting this goal, our intended audience is W-O psychologists in general, rather than a subgroup self-consciously identifying as "critical"; we hope that those who do so identify will nevertheless find our review and forward-looking agenda useful. We direct our review broadly because we believe that many or most W-O psychologists enter the field with a desire to shape work so as to be more just, sensitive to the needs of human dignity, and conscious of workplace suffering (Prilleltensky & Stead, 2013). Yet as critical scholars we also are attentive to how the desire for an affirmative disciplinary project may be diverted by institutional and historical conditions from which our ideas develop. We thus view critique as an ongoing activity from within the field, whose goal is to develop reflexivity about how W-O psychology arrived where it has and how it can move forward, both as a discipline and in its relation to the wider world.

Critical perspectives have had a continued, if marginal, existence within psychology more broadly, addressing the lived experiences of persons within systems of power (Fine, 2012; McDonald & Bubna-Litic, 2012) and examining psychology in its relations to domination (Rose, 1996) and emancipatory possibilities (Teo, 1999). Within this small but feisty subfield of critical psychology, critical voices within work and organizational psychology have been even more infrequent (cf., Bal et al., 2019; Manroop, 2017; Mumby, 2019; Parker, 2009; Symon & Cassell, 2006; Weber, Höge, & Hornung, 2020). This is surprising, given the location of worker experience at the heart of the labor process (Braverman, 1974), and thus at the crux of key social tensions—work and home life (Hatton, 2017), capital and labor (Burawoy, 1979), autonomy and control (Axel, 2009), recognition and redistribution (Fraser & Honneth, 2003). Recognizing this deficit, calls have appeared to develop critical perspectives in W-O psychology further (Bal et al., 2019), with conference meetings, journal special issues, and similar initiatives

emerging within the field. These initiatives have not set out to form an autonomous subgroup or critical niche, but to build on experiences of work psychologists across the field in transversal, inclusive formats.

The critical potential of W-O psychology research and theory inheres in its position as a crucible for insights situating workers' psychological processes within the economic and social structures that enable and constrain individuals and groups at work (Islam, 2020) and mediate social inequalities (van Dijk et al., 2020). W-O psychology sits at the interface of "external" workplace dynamics and "internal" subjective experiences, drawing on both to build integrative theory and empirical research. This in-between position reflects a double-ness of W-O psychology in terms of its primary disciplinary community, positioned between psychology and management/business. This position takes on significance in the context of institutional and career-related transformations in the psychology field, as W-O psychology research and teaching are increasingly carried out against the context of management scholarship in business schools (e.g., Staw, 2016; Levine & Moreland, 1990). Critiques within the field of psychology around "dust-bowl" empiricism (Schoenfeldt, 1999), disciplinary narrowness (Ackers, 2006) or neglect of socio-economic contexts (Teo, 2015) are related to but distinct from ongoing critiques of management scholarship, that have taken management to task for promoting "pop psychology" (Cederström, & Spicer, 2015; Davis, 2015), instrumentalizing human experience (Islam, 2012) or "colonizing the lifeworld" (cf., Alvesson & Willmott, 2003). Positioning critique from within this complex theoretical and institutional space is a core task for emerging critical W-O psychology scholarship. Yet, despite being arguably the key asset and the most-difficult theoretical-empirical challenge for critical W-O psychology, its Janus-facing position and the implications thereof have not come under sustained theorization or analysis.

The current paper addresses this issue by surveying the state of critical W-O psychology and theorizing its position as an emerging academic movement. We base our analysis around the questions: *What are the main features of W-O psychology critique, and what are the possibilities and challenges of building critique from within its particular disciplinary position?* As suggested above, we consider "position" both as an epistemic issue, addressing ways of knowing within a scholarly community, and an institutional space, around organizing a scholarly community, and argue that the two are deeply intertwined. Our goal is to promote reflexivity—that is, the ability to "assess critically.[the] process of knowledge making and knowledge application" (Teo, 2015, p. 247)—at this stage of the development of critical W-O psychology to nurture its ongoing growth.

The remainder of this paper unfolds as follows: First, we provide a broad overview of some core concerns of critical W-O psychology to the present time. Then, we situate the field in relation to two key interlocutors: the broader field of W-O psychology, characterized by similar content areas as critical W-O psychology but distinct epistemological, methodological and, at times, social/political positions, and a critical management studies (CMS) field that draws upon psychological concepts while focusing on critical methodologies, but operates against distinct structural constraints. We then examine the position of critical W-O psychology in this complex field to build a critical research agenda to allow dialogue with both of these adjacent communities. This agenda directs our discussion, where we lay out areas for future research and speculate on possible challenges for critical W-O psychology moving forward.

## **Critical perspectives in W-O psychology**

What it means for scholarship to be "critical" is historically variable and context bound, and debates over its definition have been central to

critical theory itself (cf., Hammersley, 2005). In a sense, all good scholarship is “critical” insofar as it applies concepts and methods to phenomena of interest in ways that are reflexive and reasoned rather than automatic and wrote (Teo, 2015). Conceived thus, psychological science exhibits criticality by examining bias and striving for reasoned and evidenced conclusions (Lamont, 2020). Yet our use of the term, following Horkheimer’s (1992) definition, goes further to suggest that theory is critical when it takes into account its own possibilities of production, i.e. how and why certain ideas arise at certain times, what they do, and what they obscure (see also Celikates, 2006). Such a definition does not negate the role of the theory and data to understand psychological phenomena but adds reflexivity as intrinsic to theorizing, as knowledge practices are placed within and shape social context, and thus also involves a pragmatic component. Importantly, this definition does not equate “critique” with “denunciation,” although acknowledging scholarship as socially embedded is consistent with a focus on social and political advocacy, requiring knowledge to be seen within a broader social system or institutional structure. Self-consciously critical scholarship thus also intertwines “scientific” and “emancipatory” knowledge motives (Habermas, 1972), emphasizing the importance of knowledge to action, not only in the sense of being “applied,” but in the sense of a *vita activa* or a socially reflective, politically active life (Arendt, 1958).

One implication of this usage is that descriptions of “critical” W-O psychology are not meant to describe it as an oppositional camp or identity as opposed to a “mainstream” W-O psychology, although it does describe variations *within* the academic field that have wider epistemological and ideological implications. Rather than asking if a given study is or is not “critical,” our interest is understanding the moments of criticality, the contexts of its emergence, and the objects of critique it takes up (cf., Celikates, 2006). This broad conception of criticality allows it to adopt an inclusive scope within W-O psychological

scholarship, including classical European critical theory (Horkheimer, 1992) and reflexive and emancipatory traditions from diverse origins, including activist and applied sources (cf., Reedy & King, 2019; Weber, Höge, & Hornung, 2020). Considered in a “dialectical” way, i.e. as moving between theory and practice, critique, in its attitude of challenging orthodoxy, is internal to an academic field, not set against the field.

In this spirit, our study is aimed both at psychologists who locate themselves within a “critical” tradition and those who do not, and we treat “critical W-O psychology” as a broad tent with porous and historically contingent boundaries. Rather than categorically oppose critical W-O psychology to a simplistically imagined “mainstream” considered to be “uncritical,” we hope to promote greater criticality *within* W-O psychology research. In this sense, criticality is future-orientated, imagining new ways of knowing, but also firmly anchored in the past critiques of W-O psychology as a field. It has family resemblances to other traditions within work psychology, such as those concerned with social issues including worker democracy (Ferrerias et al., 2020), diversity (Roberson, 2019) or justice (Rupp et al., 2017), or the humanistic tradition, which highlights issues of dignity and respect (e.g., Zickar, 2010). Such approaches often share social concerns with critical views, but to the extent that they do not locate their analyses as related to the reflexive, systemic and emancipatory concerns described above, they remain distinct, if complementary, projects.

The relative rarity of avowedly critical scholarship within the W-O field appears particularly notable in view of the background of much more prolific critical voices within psychology more generally (e.g., Hook, 2005; Parker, 2015; Rose, 1996; Teo, 2015). Critical psychology has proliferated across disciplinary and national contexts (Teo, 2015), although discussions have often been located in particular disciplinary niches, from community psychology (e.g., Lykes, 2003) to feminist psychology (e.g., Burman, 1998). Given the centrality of

work processes in W-O psychology, it is somewhat surprising that discussions from the critical labor tradition (e.g., Parker, 2009) have not penetrated more into work psychology, and that this branch of psychology has not been at the forefront of critical discussions around the construction of individuals through work processes (cf., Miller & Rose, 1995). More work exists in some non-anglophone traditions, which have crossed periodically into English-language literature, such as French work psychology (e.g., Dejours & Deranty, 2010) and German critical work psychology (Weber, Höge, & Hornung, 2020); however, systematic translation of these traditions has been slow to develop.

Although marginal, critical voices have nevertheless appeared periodically throughout the history of W-O psychology, interrogating the nature, purpose, and effects of research in this field (Bal et al., 2019; Gerard, 2016; Islam & Zyphur, 2006; Weber, Höge, & Hornung, 2020). Some of these voices have problematized orthodoxies in W-O psychology research practice, calling for epistemological and methodological diversification (Symon & Cassell, 2006). Others have explored paradigmatic alternatives for W-O psychology research, championing approaches such as feminism (Lawthom, 1999) or post-structuralism (Islam & Zyphur, 2006), or adapting long-standing traditions such as psychoanalysis (Bornstein, 2005). Still others have focused on the ideological roles of W-O psychology in reinforcing managerial perspectives over those of workers (Baritz, 1960; Mumby, 2019). These field-wide critiques have dialogued with scholarship critically examining and reimagining specific W-O psychology topics such as job satisfaction (Nord, 1977), psychological contracts (Cullinane & Dundon, 2006), or well-being (Prilleltensky & Stead, 2013).

Of the varied critiques of W-O psychology as a field, a distinction may be made between those focusing on internal aspects of knowledge production (e.g., Islam & Zyphur, 2006), i.e. the ontology, epistemology/methodology or specific constructs of W-O psychology, and those

focusing on the relations between W-O psychology and wider structures of power ideology and governance (e.g., Kaufman, 2020). These “internal” and “external” critiques have circulated somewhat autonomously, and while they share conceptual and historical foundations, these have not been made explicit. Little work has been done to explore the diversity of W-O psychology critiques, and the range of different issues they may generate, even at the descriptive level of understanding and categorizing the field. Conceptually, such work would consider how critiques are interrelated, to understand the imbrication of scientific, disciplinary, and socio-political aspects of critical W-O psychology.

As a background for a more general consideration of critical W-O psychology, we illustrate five common and sustained critiques of W-O psychology as a field that have emerged from the critical literature. We heuristically label these scientism, individualism, managerialism, neoliberalism/capitalism, and hegemony. They involve both “internal” (focused on substantive topics and methods) and “external,” (addressing social, economic, and political issues) critiques. Not meant to be exhaustive, they sample key issues in critical W-O psychology. Within each theme, scholars have engaged in both negative or denunciatory critique and more positive or emancipatory discourse, suggesting alternative possibilities for the field, although the latter remains underdeveloped (Bal et al., 2019). This brief catalog parallels similar critical perspectives from adjacent and overlapping fields, such as HRM (e.g., Troth & Guest, 2020—managerialism, individualism, decontextualization, positivism), and social psychology as applied to work and organizations (McDonald & Bubnalitic, 2012—positivism, managerialism, intrapsychic focus, lack of ethical framework). These family resemblances make it particularly important to note the specific critiques within W-O psychology while keeping an eye on its disciplinary neighbors, which we will address subsequently.

## Scientism

The idea of “scientism” has been used to describe an emphasis on calculability and measurement over critical reason (cf., Visser, 2019), coupled with a displacement of methodological approaches other than hypothetico-deductivism and post-positivism (Kaufman, 2020). The “scientific” character of W-O psychology has persisted as a central point of disciplinary identity from its earliest days (Münsterberg, 1913), despite acknowledgments of the limits of empirical positivism<sup>1</sup> from the positivist philosophy of science itself, and from its applications in the social sciences (cf., Ackroyd, 2004). The assumption of “value-free” or “objective” research, insofar as it forecloses on discussions of the social foundations of methods (e.g., Amis & Silk, 2008), creates a self-reinforcing cycle of paradigmatic homogeneity (cf., Johnson et al., 2006).

The relative isolation of W-O psychology from neighboring social sciences, where non-positivistic approaches are more commonplace, allows this paradigmatic homogeneity to remain relatively unchecked (Steffy & Grimes, 1992). W-O psychology may not be alone in distancing itself from surrounding disciplines—arguably, this observation could apply to psychology more broadly—but the dominance of post-positivistic and quantitative approaches is particularly marked in W-O as a field (e.g., McKenna et al., 2011). This may be related to the history of psychology in processes of calculation and control (Rose, 1996, 1999); despite the existence of several histories of W-O psychology (e.g. Koppes, 2007), a current critical historical “genealogy” of such techniques within W-O psychology remains to be done (cf., Hollway, 1991). Nevertheless, with some notable exceptions (e.g., a special section of *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology* edited by Symon and Cassell (2006) on neglected perspectives in W-O psychology research), departures from the standard scientific paradigm are startlingly rare.

The consequences of persistent scientism have been pointed out in extant literature. Since the “logic of variables” predominates in W-O psychology, research focuses on variables and establishing relationships between them as a means of interpreting causality, while important questions about complexity, context, relevance, and epistemic justice remain unaskable or unasked (Teo, 2018). While scientific objectivity has been lauded by some as a guarantee against managerial co-optation (e.g., Palmer, 2006), the distance between theory and practice has fomented concerns over the “relevance” of WOP research (Cascio & Aguinis, 2008). When framed from critical or humanistic perspectives, this translates into a critique of the lack of moral and ethical engagement within workplace research (Lefkowitz, 2011; McDonald & Bubna-Litic, 2012). Narrow criteria around the validation of and relationships between constructs obscure alternative ways of knowing and theorizing, limiting self-reflection among researchers and hindering goals of emancipation in organizational life (Steffy & Grimes, 1992). Hollway (1991, p. 7) also critiques the absence of reflexivity in W-O psychology:

there is virtually no debate about the status of the knowledge which makes up work psychology and this state of affairs is the result of the uncritical identification of work psychology with behavioural science, which in turn identifies with natural science (. . .) Science provides a justification for believing that there is no problem with the status of knowledge.

In her poststructuralist history of the field, she problematizes the stance that it is possible for W-O psychology research to generate objective, universal “truths” about organizational life, arguing instead for locating pluralistic knowledges within their historical conditions of production, to undermine “the illegitimate power of science to produce a sanitized version of what work psychology is and how it came to be that way” (Hollway, 1991, p. 11).

One result of scientism in W-O psychology is the near-ubiquity of quantitative methodologies in research (Baritz, 1960; Gerard, 2016; Hollway, 1991; Islam & Zyphur, 2006; Symon & Cassell, 2006). The quantitative/qualitative methodological border does not map directly onto the positivist/non-positivist epistemological landscape: “qualitative positivism” is commonplace in organizational research (Prasad & Prasad, 2002) and quantitative research may be forthright about its value-laden aspects (Zyphur & Pierides, 2019). However, qualitative research within W-O psychology has often taken the role of “academic resistance” to scientism (Symon et al., 2008), despite often being used as a precursor to quantitative analysis where it does appear (Cassell & Symon, 2006). Meanwhile, non-quantitative modes of research—such as action-focused scholarship on how organizational direction may be collaboratively established (Prins, 2006) or in-depth understandings of how women experience the transition to motherhood in organizational contexts (Millward, 2006)—yield rich forms of knowledge that are largely absent from leading W-O psychology journals. Methodological isomorphism promotes a disciplinary “common-sense” that unwittingly restricts the diversity of viewpoints available in the field to the detriment of the quality and applicability of W-O psychology knowledge and practice (Symon & Cassell, 2006).

### *Individualism*

The primary unit of analysis in W-O psychology is the individual and, despite a trend toward multi-level research, higher-order phenomena are often explored through aggregating individual-level data (Mathieu & Chen, 2011). Using the individual as the unit of theorizing and analysis is a core feature of psychology more generally, one that distinguishes it from other disciplines, making it unsurprising and largely accepted in the context of W-O psychology (Anseel et al., 2018; Troth & Guest,

2020). Yet the situatedness of W-O psychology within workplace contexts, i.e. at the core of the social system of production, suggests that W-O psychology is embedded in social, political, and economic contexts that should condition our theorizing (Islam, 2020; Dóci & Bal, 2018).

Critical scholarship has been concerned that an over-reliance on the individual unit of analysis can lead to a neglect of socio-political structural dynamics on psychological phenomena (Islam & Zyphur, 2009; McDonald & Bubna-Litic, 2017) limited understanding of psychological experience as socially constituted (Henriques et al., 1984; Rose, 1999), and the proliferation of potentially trivial “micro-theories” (Hill, 2006; McDonald & Bubna-Litic, 2012). While multi-level methods have facilitated an awareness of aggregative and less often, emergent aspects of interaction (Mathieu & Chen, 2011), these may be unable to capture the relational patterns, practical and power relations that constitute macro-level phenomena (cf., Fiske, 2002 for a critique of typical psychological approaches to macro-culture). While psychology may consider itself a “micro” domain, the interchangeability of these levels means that system elements cannot be left entirely out of psychological accounts (Islam, 2020). Thus, a key question in critical psychology is how to acknowledge psychology’s distinctive disciplinary focus on individual experience while allowing structural factors to enter theorizing in ways that promote integration between micro- and macro-levels (Islam, 2020).

Taken to applied settings and presented as scientifically legitimate, the individualism of W-O psychology has practical consequences for employees. Failure to recognize social power asymmetries as rooted in organizational architectures and micro-relations of dominance bolsters acceptance of the status quo and depoliticizes organizations (Gordo & De Vos, 2010). Structural injustices are reframed as individual burdens, with psychological solutions proposed for problems that employees feel powerless to

address (Pilgrim & Treacher, 1993). The effect of obscuring structural asymmetries has particular consequences for disadvantaged groups, such as women, reinforcing gender inequalities and failing to take account of gendered social realities (Dick & Nadin, 2006). In this way, psychology's individualism has been the target of critique by feminist scholars (Lawthom, 1999) along with critical race scholars (Salter & Adams, 2013) and post-colonial theorists (Hook, 2005), among others.

Scientism and individualism reinforce each other within W-O psychology. The individual unit of analysis dovetails neatly with hypothetico-deductive approaches to research because of the practical difficulties of gathering group-level data (Porter, 1993). In parallel, attempts to root psychology in intersubjective processes, perhaps because of their suggestion of social constructionist approaches, have been dismissed as "subjective" or "unscientific" (cf., Christopher & Hickinbottom, 2008). Both scientism and individualism may be seen as "internal" aspects of psychological theorizing because of their emergence in the substantive (individualism) and methodological (scientism) development of the field. W-O psychology's relation with wider social and institutional processes, however, introduces "external" factors that have drawn distinct critiques, as we describe below.

### **Managerialism**

Managerialism in W-O psychology directs research energy to topics of concern to managers and other powerful individuals and groups in organizations, framing problems in terms of managerial priorities (Locke & Spender, 2011). This critique is not new. Kornhauser (1947) suggested that industrial psychology's focus on managers' "people problems" compromised its potential to inform the wider human problems within industry. Pointing beyond the content of theories, Kornhauser focused on their institutional supports, "who controls the research, and

to what ends? Do we work on the problems of the private businessman, or on the problems of society?" (Kornhauser, 1947, p. 224). Kornhauser's rhetorical question is reflected in recent recapitulations of critiques of managerialism in W-O psychology (e.g., Bal & Dóci, 2018; Delbridge & Keenoy, 2010).

Where an assumption of unitarism frames the concerns of a single group (i.e. managers) as those of the organization as a whole, employees' interests are downplayed, a false sense of goal alignment prevails (Provis, 1996), and the antagonisms of organizational politics are obscured (Contu, 2018). In practice, the development and deployment of psychological technologies according to the interests of a dominant managerial group may reinforce power disparities between managers and workers (Baritz, 1960). Thus, the managerialism of W-O psychology obscures and marginalizes issues of resistance and struggle in organizations (Godard, 2014). The normalization and privileging of the perspectives of a restricted stakeholder group may restrict insights into the "politically charged, messy, contradictory and ambiguous side of organizational life under capitalism" (Dashtipour, 2015, p. 194) and ultimately limit the potential for imagining and exploring alternative forms of creating organizations (cf., Weber, Unterrainer, & Höge, 2020 for a discussion of the psychological outcomes of organizational democracy).

To the extent that positioning W-O psychology as objective science reduces the onus on researchers to consider ideological factors, critiques of W-O psychology's managerialism may be met with incredulity or ring hollow (e.g., Zacher, 2019); considering research to be apolitical makes it difficult to reflexively unpack the interests underlying theories. W-O psychology's individualism further obscures the managerialist critique, as it becomes difficult to see managerial bias in collective terms, obscuring issues of class and reducing conflicts to questions of individual motivation and interest.



### *Neoliberalism/capitalism*

Related to but broader than the managerialist critique has been a persistent argument that W-O psychology has been complicit in supporting capitalism (Gerard, 2017; Islam & Zyphur, 2009; Prilleltensky, 1994; Steffy & Grimes, 1986) and—more recently—neoliberalism (e.g., Bal & Dóci, 2018).<sup>2</sup> Some scholars suggest that neoliberal capitalism has been achieved in part through an emphasis on psychologization (cf., De Vos, 2012) that attempts to reduce and capture social logics into questions of subjectivity, shaping individuals who are able to operate within capitalism (Gordo & De Vos, 2010, cf. Bettache & Chiu, 2019 for a discussion of neoliberalism and social psychology). This argument has been extended to a broader historical and cultural critique by Rose (1999), who traces the processes by which psychology shaped the notion of the individual worker over two centuries to create the idea of a manageable, self-motivated worker. Critical scholars have charted consequences of neoliberalism in W-O psychology that range from its influence upon the specific constructs that comprise the knowledge base of the discipline—such as psychological contracts (Cullinane & Dundon, 2006) and idiosyncratic deal-making (Hornung & Höge, 2019)—to its shaping of large-scale systems that contextualize it, such as the structures of work and employment in India (Noronha & D’Cruz, 2017).

In its most recent iterations within W-O psychology, Bal and Dóci (2018) argue that neoliberalism influences W-O psychology research through political, social, and fantasmatic logics. Politically, they suggest that W-O psychology instrumentalizes people and resources for profit-generation and utility maximization, valorizes individualism by positioning individuals as self-interested and responsible for their fates and frames social relations as relations of resource competition. Socially, W-O psychology promotes a focus on performance and instrumentality, as well as individualized goals. As a

fantasmatic logic, W-O psychology leverages fantasies of harmonious employment relationship to ideologically shape organizational life. Bal and Dóci (2018) encourage awareness of neoliberal assumptions in their research and stress the need for alternative assumptions.

Given its status as the branch of psychology most clearly situated within the labor process, it is surprising that critical W-O psychology does not have more to say about capitalism, including issues such as worker subjectivity, suffering, and coping strategies. To be sure, some work in W-O psychology highlights capitalist process such as workplace inequality (van Dijk et al., 2020) or joblessness (Manroop, 2017), laying foundations for critical perspectives without directly critiquing capitalism at work. Gerard (2014) notes the virtual absence of the term “capitalism” from SIOP (Society for Industrial-Organizational Psychology) publications, and in a telling comparison, remarks on the difference between management and psychology literatures in this respect. Moreover, when critiques do appear, they often draw negative or even dismissive responses. For instance, Rudolph and Zacher (2018) argue that neoliberal ideology, as a “distal exogenous influence” (p. 556), is not the business of psychology per se, questioning what evidence could show the effects of ideology as a “variable” acting on psychological processes. In response, Weber, Höge, and Hornung (2020) summarize work linking neoliberal (or similar) orientations to psychological outcomes, while noting the risk of using “the very same logic that was highlighted as problematic in the first place” (p. 14) by evaluating critique through the lens of scientism (i.e., if ideology is important, it should have an empirical “effect” that is observable using traditional psychological paradigms and methodologies). Similarly, Zacher (2019) argues that because ideology is a society-level construct and W-O psychology focuses on individual-level variation, then ideology remains outside of the purview of work psychology except as a higher-level or moderating factor. Such views, which seems to erase the possibility for critique itself

within psychology, are not new and have been addressed by pointing to a long history of ideology-critique within psychology (Weber, Höge, & Hornung, 2020), a tradition highlighting that reflexive science requires interrogating the socio-economic bases of its own production.

### Hegemony

We use the broad category of “hegemony” to refer to the tendency to extend universality to concepts proper to one group or population (Gramsci, 1971; Mather, 2003). Itself a diverse and contested term (Anderson, 2017), hegemony is a useful concept in that it groups several related critiques around the tendency of psychological theorizing to theorize from particular geographic, ethnic, and gender groups, while not acknowledging this group-specificity and treating the produced knowledge as universal (Mather, 2003). Importantly, it is not the universalism of theory that is at issue, but the *pretension* to universalism that obscures geographic, ethnic or gender differences at an explicit level while maintaining these differences in practice in a variety of ways.

W-O psychology is geographically concentrated in the global North, exerting a gravitational pull on research in other parts of the world (Ackers, 2006; Cascio & Aguinis, 2008; Teo & Afşin, 2020). Within the global North, and despite increasing diversity in leading W-O psychology journals over past decades, U.S. output has dwarfed other regions (Cascio & Aguinis, 2008; Meuse et al., 2014) and European scholarship makes up a sizable portion of the remainder, particularly the UK and the Netherlands (Cassell & Symon, 2006). The rest of W-O psychology scholarship is unevenly distributed, with certain countries such as South Africa (de Kock, 2017) and Brazil (VandenBos & Winkler, 2015) dominating production from the global South. While geographical distribution is distinct from epistemic dominance, such distributional asymmetries effectively limit the

diversity of academics and research participants, shaping views of the human within psychology in general (Henrich et al., 2010; Rad et al., 2018) and W-O psychology in particular (Myers, 2016).

Geographical asymmetries are translated into hegemonic processes when scholarship in the global South begins to draw, voluntarily or through lack of alternatives, on frameworks developed in Northern contexts and overlook local empirical or theoretical resources. Themselves overlaid on economic, geopolitical and colonial histories of domination (Hook, 2005), such epistemic borrowing can lead to “intellectual dependency relationships between centers of knowledge production and the local academic communities [...] contribut[ing] to technoscientific domination” (Castañeda & Sanchez, 1978, cited Pulido-Martinez, 2019, p. 673). Failure to frame alternative conceptualizations, based on locally produced knowledge, to prevalent norms in leading journals may lead to difficulty for authors, as these norms show inertia in the face of a globalizing field (cf., Mondo & Kraut, 2010).

While hegemony can be expressed through geographical asymmetries, similar critiques may be made regarding historically underrepresented social groups. To take gender as an illustrative example, scholars have noted the underrepresentation of women in higher-ranked faculty positions (Gardner et al., 2018) and publication authorship (König et al., 2015) in the U.S.-based SIOP. Expanding from issues of numerical representation to more structural critiques, Lawthom (1999) argues that the field has “progressed largely in a gender-blind way” (p. 69) and thus risks an impoverished understanding of gender in organizational life. Similarly, Fotaki (2020) notes that the emancipatory and praxis-focused aspects of feminism offer deep theoretical challenges to contemporary views of organization. Thus, while a prolific literature has emerged in W-O psychology around organizational diversity (e.g., Roberson, 2019) and the cognitive bases of discrimination (e.g., Colella

et al., 2017), critical perspectives are distinct in their more systemic critiques of how gender shapes the field itself. Similar kinds of critiques could be formulated around discussions of race or ethnicity (cf., Hook, 2005), or disability (cf., Fine, 2012) in the context of understanding workplaces in counter-hegemonic ways, both in terms of numerical representation and theoretical-epistemic standpoints for theory production.

### *Intersecting critiques*

As noted above, field-wide critiques of W-O psychology have involved, non-exhaustively, concerns of scientism, individualism, managerialism, neoliberalism/capitalism, and hegemony. What is most interesting is how these critiques, taken together, form a constellation giving critical W-O psychology a distinctive patterning. The different critiques, as suggested above, are interrelated: critiques of the scientific bias in W-O psychology often center around flattening out human experience during nomothetic scale validation (e.g., Zyphur & Pierides, 2017), itself linked to a politics of standardization and commensuration that characterizes neoliberalism (Mennicken & Espeland, 2019) and can obscure geographical and group-based diversity. Conversely, neoliberal pressures of audit culture and the managerial imperative of performance measurement (e.g., Power, 1997) shape agendas and tilt research toward standardizable and performance-related constructs, focusing on individual behavior rather than relational or collective processes (cf., Rose, 1996). This focus furthers hegemonic processes (Mather, 2003) by equating particular group interests with organizational interests more broadly, while universalizing concepts and masking power relations. W-O psychology's individualism and the focus on internal processes (Haslam, 2004) buttresses managerialist control by obscuring the relational processes that support solidarity and worker organization (Islam, 2012), further disadvantaging

marginalized groups, and in turn eroding resistance and collective responses to neoliberalism. While exploring each of these specific linkages would be outside of the scope of the current paper, we present these in summary form, for illustrative purposes, in Table 1.

In short, critical W-O psychology launches multi-level critiques that are mutually reinforcing to respond to a W-O psychology field whose diverse ideological functions are themselves interrelated. In doing so, critical W-O psychology draws parallels to the CMS tradition in management, with which it has several parallels. Yet, as we will see below, several aspects of critical W-O psychology set it apart from CMS (cf., Mills & Mills, 2013), creating a distinct set of critical possibilities and challenges.

### **Critical W-O psychology and critical management studies**

As noted in the introduction, critical W-O psychology has been deeply affected by its development at the interface of disciplinary boundaries (psychology and management disciplines) as well institutional boundaries (psychology departments and business schools). As early as 1971, Lawler noted that organizational psychologists had begun to move to business schools, and more recently, "brain drain" from psychology departments has been a topic of discussion (cf., Aguinis et al., 2014), although it may be more marked in the U.S. context than in Europe (Anseel et al., 2014). For several decades, specific topics, such as team psychology, have been seen as "alive and well and living elsewhere [outside the confines of social-psychology laboratories]" (Levine & Moreland, 1990, p. 620). Perhaps faced with the challenge of positioning themselves vis-a-vis sociologists and economists, the study of more "macro" topics like groups helped psychologists gain relevance and legitimacy in the business school context.

The establishment of W-O psychology in business schools between the 1980s and the early 2000s (Cascio & Aguinis, 2008) also

**Table 1.** Points of intersections between WOP critiques: e.g. S → I = how does scientism fuel individualism?

	<b>Scientism</b>	<b>Individualism</b>	<b>Managerialism</b>	<b>Neoliberalism</b>	<b>Hegemony</b>
<b>Scientism</b>		(S → I) measurement simplified at individual unit of analysis through psychometric tests	(S → M) legitimization of management through “evidence-based” approach	(S → N) technologies of worker control, surveillance and value extraction	(S → H) single scientific method treated as exclusive conduit for knowledge
<b>Individualism</b>	(I → S) individual focus distinguishes psychology from social sciences, establishes stable unit of study		(I → M) delegitimizes group/identity-based demands and solidarity	(I → N) Frames work phenomena as individual choice and responsibility	(I → H) Western notions of individual projected across global contexts
<b>Managerialism</b>	(M → S) technocratic ethos creates demand for “objective” science of human relations	(M → I) managerial control works through individuating technique of worker management		(M → N) Management promotes capitalist value-creation, alignment with owners over workers	(M → H) managerial interests substitute for organizational interests, obscuring other actors
<b>Neoliberalism</b>	(N → S) academic reward system incentivizes publication and academic capital	(N → I) fragments workers through competition, frames humans as self-interested	(N → M) value extraction requires managerial control & worker surveillance, management as ideological legitimization work		(N → H) psychology formed in a given economic context taken to characterizing humanity as a whole
<b>Hegemony</b>	(H → S) denial of diverse epistemic paradigms and methods	(H → I) presumption of single perspective leads to lack of changing points of view	(H → M) top-down control legitimated by making other interests or goals invisible	(H → N) ignoring non-market or non-commodified forms of motivation and relationships	

exposed it to ideas emerging around the same time from CMS. These ideas have made small but traceable inroads into W-O psychology discussions (cf., Gerard, 2016); alternatively, critical psychologists have re-situated themselves within CMS where they may find a more welcoming reception (Islam & Zyphur, 2006). One outcome of the encounter between psychologists and organizational scholarship was to underwrite a tendency to explore the “micro-foundations” of social and organizational orders (cf., Felin et al., 2015), creating demand for topics such as affect, sensemaking, phenomenology, and practice-based perspectives. One important example of this micro-turn within organizational scholarship was a renewed interest in the daily experience of work (e.g., Delbridge & Sallaz, 2015), leading to interest in processes of bottom-up worker resistance and everyday micro-struggles (Mumby et al., 2017).

As a result of this convergence of micro- and macro-concerns, psychological topics could be studied as lenses upon broader social and political phenomena (Dashtipour, 2015; Haslam, 2004), inverting the individualist tendency to treat group phenomena as derivative and aggregates of individual constructs (Islam, 2015). One irony of this development is that, just as critically oriented psychologists searched to broaden their views beyond individual cognition, affect and behavior, micro-oriented sociologists were trying to reinsert “agency” into their structural theories by rediscovering actors (e.g., Abdelnour et al., 2017). The resulting micro-CMS benefited from a dual-facing critique that could claim to reveal the myopia of individualist psychologies while avoiding the determinisms of structurally oriented sociologies. Such translational work (e.g., Erler, 2015) underwrote the emergence of psychological themes within business schools and CMS specifically, a discussion which largely remained outside of psychology journals.

A second consequence of the emergence of psychology-related research in business schools was the mingling of heterogeneous psychological traditions within the “holding environment”

of the business school (Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2010). A prime example is psychoanalysis, an increasingly marginalized approach within post-positivist psychology (Bornstein, 2005), but a burgeoning literature within CMS (e.g., Arnaud & Vidaillet, 2018). While early psychoanalytic perspectives in organizational scholarship used traditional models of psychoanalysis to put organizations “on the couch” (cf., Gabriel, 1999), continued engagement with CMS led to an emerging psychoanalytic literature that engaged with critical themes such as capitalism (Bloom, 2016), and were more self-consciously aligned with critical theory (Arnaud & Vidaillet, 2018). Similar trajectories could be traced regarding other non-mainstream perspectives within psychology, such as the psychology of ethnicity and race (cf., Zanoni et al., 2017), feminist psychology (cf., Vachhani, 2012) and phenomenological approaches (e.g., Klein, 2015), all of which took on a critical alloy within the crucible of CMS.

The development and mixture of critical psychological approaches within CMS makes it particularly relevant to W-O psychology (Gerard, 2016), although the unique disciplinary mixture and institutional stakes of CMS makes its project somewhat distinct from critical W-O psychology, as discussed below. Contrasting the two, however, must begin with a frank admission of their family resemblances, primarily because both are positioned at the crux of academia and corporate interests and exert similar roles as formative spaces for managers and consultants (Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2010).

Notably, variations on the previously mentioned critiques of scientism, individualism, managerialism and neoliberalism have appeared and flourished within CMS. For instance, CMS research explicitly posits itself as operating against a post-positivist mainstream (Grey & Willmott, 2005), although this mainstream includes a significant degree of positivist-oriented qualitative research (Amis & Silk, 2008). Sometimes describing method as part of a political strategy to avoid closure (Westwood &

Jack, 2007), CMS research moves between inclusion perspectives emphasizing methodological pluralism (e.g., Ackroyd, 2004) and resistance perspectives viewing critical research as a counter-hegemonic strategy (e.g., Symon et al., 2008). Further, CMS has been prolific about the pro-management biases of organizational scholarship and has attempted to include alternative perspectives (Parker & Parker, 2017) and non-capitalist forms of organization. CMS has been quick to problematize the individual as a locus of organizational responsibility (Fleming, 2015), even as it claims to represent individual narratives (Cunliffe & Coupland, 2012) and question structurally deterministic views (Symon et al., 2008), leading to ongoing debates about the role of actors within larger organizational and social structures.

Nevertheless, CMS has itself been subjected to critiques that are informative to critical W-O psychologists. Critiques of CMS often refer to their paradoxical and somewhat uncomfortable position within business schools and the management field (e.g., Rowlinson & Hassard, 2011), residing within the institutions they critique, while “operating from a safe distance” (Böhm & Spoelstra, 2004, p. 99). CMS has also been critiqued for closing off space for plural voices (Wray-Bliss, 2004), and for an over-focus on negative critique that leaves out consideration of how fields are “positively” constructed (McLean & Alcadipani, 2008). In short, the CMS project is constituted from within specific epistemic and institutional conditions (Mills & Mills, 2013), which are complementary to yet distinct from the psychologically informed analytical prism of W-O psychology. Thus, locating a critical tradition within W-O psychology while maintaining dialogue with CMS involves careful “positioning,” which we elaborate below.

### **Critical W-O psychology between W-O psychology and CMS**

Juxtaposing critical W-O psychology with CMS reveals differences at the level of the specific

topics of study, the methodological stakes of critical scholarship, and the ways in which levels of analysis are treated in psychology and management domains. Moreover, differences in the sociology of their home disciplines—psychology and management—as well as the institutional homes within psychology departments and business schools, open up further points of contrast. For illustrative purposes, we describe some of the key comparison points in Table 2.

Similar to our summary of field-wide critiques, we may say that the issues that are relevant to this discussion broadly have “internal” and “external” aspects: we can consider themes and methods as the “internal” aspects of scholarly knowledge, while the disciplinary and institutional features link these aspects to “external” conditions for development and require other forms of sociological explanation, although these two broad domains are deeply interlinked (Desrosières, 1998). We consider each of these next.

### **Internal dynamics: Concepts and methods of critical W-O psychology**

The most common issues raised in critical W-O psychology have been either substantive, concerning forms of psychological knowledge about work (e.g., Dashtipour, 2015), or methodological, often in the forms of critiques of positivism or an over-focus on quantitative research (e.g., Kaufman, 2020). Mostly directed at W-O psychology, however, such perspectives have drawn implicitly or explicitly on CMS literature (Gerard, 2016; McDonald & Bubna-Litic, 2012). The comparison with CMS is instructive, however, because while the two literatures have much in common, somewhat distinct issues pertain to each, as elaborated below.

#### *Thematic*

Psychological themes abound in CMS, with ample literatures around identity and subjectivity (cf., Alvesson & Willmott, 2002), often

**Table 2.** Positioning critical W-O psychology with regards to W-O psychology and critical management studies.

Academic Community	Work and Organizational Psychology	Critical Work and Organizational Psychology	Critical Management Studies
Core Themes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Individual and group behavior in work contexts</li> <li>- Antecedents and consequences of cognition, behavior, affect</li> </ul>	<p><i>Focus on individual experience, empowerment, suffering while contextualizing against structures of power</i></p> <p>← →</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Power, politics and resistance in and around organizations</li> <li>- Emancipatory possibilities of organization</li> <li>- Structural embeddedness of organizational practices</li> </ul>
Disciplinary Roots	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Personality and experimental social-psychology</li> <li>- Assessment and psychometrics</li> <li>- Human factors and ergonomics</li> </ul>	<p><i>Discursive and critical psychology</i></p> <p>← →</p> <p><i>Educational, clinical and social work</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Labor and industrial relations</li> <li>- Critical theory and continental philosophy</li> <li>- Psychoanalysis</li> </ul>
Socio-Political Context of Emergence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Industrial production/Fordism</li> <li>- Bureaucratic corporate organization</li> <li>- Demand for scientific management tools</li> </ul>	<p><i>Crisis of work/post-financial crisis</i></p> <p>← →</p> <p><i>Neoliberalization of University</i></p> <p><i>Fragmentation of psychology and “methods wars”</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Neoliberal transformation of workplace</li> <li>- Post-bureaucratic forms of work and organization</li> <li>- Entry of critical social scientists into business schools</li> </ul>
Dominant Conceptions of the Person	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Person × situation model</li> <li>- Cognition, affect, behavior complex</li> <li>- Individuals aggregated within teams/ organizations</li> </ul>	<p><i>Individual as agentic yet socially embedded</i></p> <p>← →</p> <p><i>Focus on individual and collective experience as both psychological and social/political.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Identity as socially constructed</li> <li>- “Subject” as open-ended and fluid</li> <li>- Individual as an artifact of power, e.g. biopower or other forms of domination</li> </ul>

(continued)

**Table 2.** (continued)

Academic Community	Work and Organizational Psychology	Organizational Psychology	Critical Management Studies
Epistemological/ Methodological Orientations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Empirical-positivist epistemology</li> <li>- Quantitative survey methods</li> <li>- Controlled experiments and quasi-experiments</li> <li>- Hypothetico-deductive approaches</li> <li>- "Scientific" writing style</li> </ul>	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Focus on qualitative and experiential methods</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;">← Engaged, participatory scholarship →</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Social constructionist/interpretivist/critical-epistemologies</li> <li>- Qualitative and engaged approaches</li> <li>- Discourse, semiotic and practice-based models</li> <li>- Alternative writing and presentational styles</li> </ul>
Relation to Practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Evidence-based impact</li> <li>- Applied Science based on objective findings</li> <li>- Academics and practitioners share goals but are separated by professional competencies.</li> </ul>	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Educational, collaborative and consultative role</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;">← Knowledge co-constructed with participants →</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Psychology as a support for on-the-ground movements</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Impact through direct engagement and reflexive dialogue</li> <li>- Embedded science based on emancipatory interest</li> <li>- Academics and practitioners may or may not share goals and their ways of knowing may overlap.</li> </ul>



critically considering action and stressing everyday practices of organizing (Green & Li, 2011). Likewise, themes of individual differences are often studied via critical perspectives on diversity (Zanoni et al., 2017) or heterogeneous responses to organizational controls (Alcadipani et al., 2018). At the same time, little CMS work examines individual differences around personality or attitudes, and the individual tends to disappear in CMS under broad conceptions of persons as “subjects” or “actors” (e.g., Zanoni et al., 2017; Loacker & Muhr, 2009). Moreover, cognition appears through critical sensemaking (Mills et al., 2010) or more indirectly, discursive approaches highlighting meaning-making processes (Vaara, 2006). Likewise, affect is an important and growing area within CMS, but CMS approaches to affect tend to focus on material or “embodied” conceptions that draw heavily on philosophical or metaphysical roots (cf., Fotaki, Kenny & Vachhani, 2017). In all these cases, psychological processes tend to be treated in a general way to permit micro-theorizations of organizational processes without foregrounding psychology as an object of study in itself.

By contrast, psychological perspectives on work and organizations tend to be rich in descriptions of individual differences, including personality and attitudinal variables, along with more internally complex models of cognitive processes, including social cognition (cf., Staw, 2016). A large catalog of constructs exists in W-O psychology that barely appears in CMS studies. At the same time, because much of the construct development process in W-O psychology isolates variables from their social and contextual determinants, the results may feel overly reified or mechanistic to critical scholars (Axel, 2009). Constructs such as cognitive and emotional intelligence, Big 5 personality variables, work attitudes such as job satisfaction or commitment, and managerial and leadership styles, discussed in the absence of the social forces that shape them, may feel apolitical (Islam, 2012, 2019). Presented as

stand-alone variables rather than historically contingent ways of being within contemporary power relations, they may seem to obscure rather than reveal the everyday realities of workers.

Rather than abandoning such constructs as uncritical and remaining at the level of more general notions such as “identity” or “affect,” however, critical W-O psychology should deeply engage with the intra-psychic aspects of work, while historicizing and problematizing how psychological imaginaries are built through empirical research and psychological applications. Focused on reflexivity, critical W-O psychology can examine the presuppositions of concepts such as IQ, personality and affect. A grab-bag of variables to describe individual differences and cognitive and affective processes provides ample content for critical assessment. Rather than introducing these largely understudied concepts into CMS only to then problematize them, more sensible would be to engage in such critical reflexivity in-house, to build self-consciousness around the process by which visions of the human are constructed by work psychologists. A focus on intra-individual processes and individual differences need not be uncritical—and can reveal much about social processes of subjectivation and power when examined reflexively (Rose, 1996).

### *Methodological*

Struggles over epistemology and methodology have been core aspects of the CMS project, but they have been situated within management scholarship, which is more interdisciplinary and paradigmatically complex in its origins (cf., Burrell & Morgan, 1979) than W-O psychology. CMS scholars have often championed non-positivist epistemological approaches (Adler et al., 2007) and criticized the dominance of quantitative over qualitative research as stifling the openness of theorization and blocking the voices of research subjects (Symon et al., 2008). Yet management research, drawn from fields

of psychology, sociology, anthropology, and economics, retains diverse—if unequally distributed in terms of power—methodological niches (Bansal et al., 2018). Moreover, a broad stream of more “quasi” positivistic qualitative research runs through much of organizational scholarship, notably in the largely prolific institutional theory and sensemaking approaches. While such methods do not claim a critical theoretical approach and may sometimes “mimic” quantitative approaches (Harley & Faems, 2017), the fact of methodological pluralism allows relatively spacious breathing room for critical approaches.

Methodologically, the W-O psychology literature shows a radically different picture, as we explained above. Drawn from an empirical personality and social psychology tradition, W-O psychology is largely quantitative, with even positivistic qualitative research being marginal (cf., Gergen, 2016; Symon & Cassell, 2006). Differently from CMS, which has found space in dedicated journals such as *Organization*, but also more mainstream journals such as *Organization Studies* or *Human Relations*, critical W-O psychology does not have a methodological safe-haven within the psychology literature, despite periodic appearances in mainstream journals. This different epistemological and methodological landscape presents unique challenges to critical W-O psychology scholars. For instance, while CMS scholars challenge orthodoxies by promoting engaged research (Reedy & King, 2019), embodied or sensory methods (Gherardi, 2019) or alternative forms of writing (Grey & Sinclair, 2006), critical W-O psychology scholars may face challenges even publishing relatively anodyne interpretivist or qualitative papers, which in the context of mainstream psychology may appear heterodox. Understanding the different windows of acceptability based on these different disciplinary conventions may explain some of the differences in the emerging shapes of the two sister fields.

At the same time, however, critical W-O psychology is uniquely situated to develop

critical perspectives on methods *because* of its familiarity with positivist and quantitative psychological scholarship. W-O psychology scholars may be in a unique position to problematize and unpack hidden presuppositions behind quantitative psychology (Bal & Dóci, 2018). Furthermore, historical and genealogical perspectives of quantitative methods (Zyphur & Pierides, 2019) and the counter-use of statistics for political activism (Bruno et al., 2014) are ideal topics for methodological innovation in critical W-O psychology that are relatively underdeveloped in CMS. For example, the familiarity many work psychologists have with the core W-O psychology traditions of psychometrics and testing could enable the development of critical approaches in these sub-fields (e.g., Alexandrova & Haybron, 2016). As some have noted (e.g., Rose, 1996), psychometric tests, as a technology of power, have been instrumental in constructing notions of the human that have social and political effects. Against such notions, critically minded work psychologists can use their expertise to construct counter-statistics (Bruno et al., 2014; Didier & Tasset, 2013), which use numbers to challenge, explore, and build alternative conceptions of employees. Examples of such critical work involve using community-based scale development to provide alternative measures of well-being, moving from nomothetic conceptions of psychological constructs to idiographic, contextual, and local measures that allow communities to define themselves (cf., Alexandrova, 2017).

That said, it stands to reason that, compared to CMS, critical W-O psychology faces methodological and (social) epistemological challenges as it develops critical theorizations. Given the composition of the field, it may not find ready interlocutors with sociology or industrial relations backgrounds, as is the case of CMS. Methods, rather than critique per se, may be the greatest challenge for the future development of critical W-O psychology, particularly in relation to the field of psychology more broadly.

## **External conditions: Institutional features of critical W-O psychology**

While the internal aspects of critical psychology in terms of thematic focus and methods have been key to debates within W-O psychology (e.g., Bal et al., 2019), much less discussion around the social and institutional supports for critical research has taken place. Some scholars, for example, have noted the complex position and effects of doing psychology research within business school contexts (Anseel et al., 2014; Staw, 2016). Yet these discussions remain nascent, and the comparison with CMS institutions is instructive albeit complex. We explore these aspects below.

### *Disciplinary*

Although management pedagogy has existed for over two centuries (Raynard et al., 2019), as a research field, management is much newer, and work psychology has existed for almost twice as long (Münsterberg, 1913). Moreover, although psychology remains eclectic, it is not interdisciplinary and heterogenous to the same extent as management scholarship. Because of this greater age and homogeneity, W-O psychology may be characterized as having “strong” versus “weak” disciplinarity, with more established, potentially more constraining, paradigmatic conventions. By contrast, the contradictions of the management discipline derive from its origins as patchwork of other core disciplines, with more heterogeneity of concept and methods (cf., Rowlinson & Hassard, 2011).

These differences in the relative consolidation and heterogeneity of W-O psychology and management carry mixed implications in both fields when considering the emergence of critical perspectives. For instance, the rapid emergence and growth of CMS within the management field (Rowlinson & Hassard, 2011) may have been facilitated by the relatively eclectic and young nature of management

scholarship more generally. Such an opening may be harder to secure in W-O psychology, as some resistance to critical perspectives has attested (e.g., Rudolph & Zacher, 2018). At the same time, several voices in CMS have lamented how critical voices may be re-mastered and appropriated so as to be “watered down” for mainstream management consumption, reducing their radical possibilities (Contu, 2008). Myriad examples, from worker well-being to corporate social responsibility to business ethics, have shown how critical voices can be co-opted and used for managerial interests (e.g., Fleming, 2009). Such critiques of “decaf” forms of critique have been a persistent thorn in the side of CMS scholarship (Contu, 2008), and the relative recalcitrance of a consolidated W-O psychology field may be a blessing in disguise to the extent that it allows critical perspectives to formulate genuinely alternative possibilities.

The stronger disciplinarity of W-O psychology may also have implications for the relation between academic theory and practice, also a core concern of CMS (Adler et al., 2007). A firmer policing of paradigmatic boundaries in W-O psychology may result in greater difficulty in action research and other engaged research approaches, which work with practitioners to build critique, alternative visions, and action from the bottom-up (Islam, 2015; Reedy & King, 2019). Rather than engaged approaches, W-O psychology has traditionally derived its practical “impact” from an evidence-based model where empirically validated “scientific” methods establish relations that are then “applied” to the workplace (cf., Fine, 2012; Hornung, 2012). Critical and action research approaches, however, may move beyond application of results, to include research subjects as analysts and authors, with the goal of promoting reflexivity rather than conferring scientific authority (Amis & Silk, 2008). For instance, collaborative research among activist practitioners and scholars is one way in which the “impact” of research can be reconciled with critical reflexivity (e.g., Reedy & King, 2019). At the same time, given the

tendency of co-optation and dilution of critical results described above, the relative distance from business practice vis-à-vis management scholarship may also allow critical distance among W-O psychology scholars. In both cases, critical W-O psychology would benefit from an ongoing discussion both of its relation to the mainstream, and its forms of engagement across domains of practice.

### *Institutional*

While disciplines provide an explicit community within which conventions and norms are forged (Abbott, 2001), the immediate contexts for W-O psychology scholarship are the academic or research institutions in which it takes place, as well as practical contexts such as consultancies, training centers, and human resource departments. Focusing on the academic context for W-O psychology, some overlaps as well as differences with CMS may be noted. Like CMS, much of critical W-O psychology is likely to take place in the context of business schools but also, like W-O psychology, it may straddle management and psychology departments in ways that create unique opportunities and constraints. Work psychologists may be double-affiliated between psychology departments and management schools, for example (cf., Pratt & Bonaccio, 2016). They are likely to target academic journals in both business and psychology fields, playing to alternate academic criteria depending on the audience. Faced with a growing CMS field with diverse research outlets, critical W-O psychology scholars may orient their work toward management journals to build employability in that area, somewhat ironically finding themselves drawn into the ambit of business schools as a consequence of their critical orientation.

Critical W-O psychology may draw upon and nurture dialogues between management and psychology departments, and other fields in which W-O psychology is applied such as social work and education. In cases where management departments are well-integrated into universities

and make up parts of the liberal arts area, they may be able to engage in a similar inter-disciplinarity. In many countries, however, business schools are either in the process of institutionally separating from, or have always been separate institutions from, universities,<sup>3</sup> and because most psychology departments remain within universities, the institutional divide between business schools and psychology departments is likely to be more marked.

Differences in the institutional homes of critical W-O psychology and CMS scholars may have multiple influences on disciplinary development. On the one hand, critical ideas may find more support in university settings, given their historical values of liberal arts and critical inquiry, although many scholars have questioned the continuity of these values (Reading, 1997). In terms of teaching, students in psychology departments may be more interested in the humanistic versus profit-oriented sides of learning, as compared to business students (Sagiv & Schwartz, 2000). In terms of careers, while university-based careers are increasingly precarious and often less well-paid than business schools (Aguinis et al., 2014), they may still have more job stability and protection than private, non-university business schools, especially where university tenure-norms are strong. On the other hand, despite the humanistic and critical missions of the university, this context may present difficulties for critical W-O psychology vis-à-vis business schools. For instance, the engaged aspect of critical W-O psychology may (again ironically) cohere better with the discourses of impact and practice-orientation found in business schools (cf., Rhodes et al., 2018). Critical scholarship wanting to not only understand, but change, the world, may find resonance in such contexts, although notions of what counts as “impact” may be a source of contestation (Rhodes et al., 2018). Moreover, the heterogeneity and pragmatic orientation of business schools may make it easier to propose new ideas vis-à-vis the relatively slow pace of university change,

despite the dangers of such adoption being co-opted into “pop” management fads (Jackson, 2001). Nevertheless, recent crises around CMS within business schools and universities (cf., Guardian, April 15, 2021) suggests that the CMS field is far from secure in either setting, and current conflicts around the disciplines should be watched closely by critical scholars across domains.

In general, both the disciplinary and institutional factors create the image of a critical W-O psychology that faces challenges and opportunities that are distinct from CMS. The fact that critical W-O psychology has and continues to work across these relatively different institutional contexts is likely to be an ongoing determinant of its development.

## Discussion

In the above analysis, we examined recent discussions around critical W-O psychology as an emerging movement, both relating it to and differentiating it from CMS while attempting to situate critical perspectives within a distinctive W-O discipline. This approach led us to focus both on intra-disciplinary issues around theory and method and institutional features of disciplinary and academic organizations. Synthesizing the arguments developed above, we can point to two broad principles that constitute the contributions of the current paper and point to a future agenda in critical W-O psychology.

### *Disciplinary matters*

While we promote the tendency of critical W-O psychology to examine broad social questions such as inequality (Fine, 2012; van Dijk et al., 2020), ideology (Parker, 2009), and neoliberalism (Dóci & Bal, 2018), the specific contributions of critical W-O psychology have distinct value from the critical traditions in other fields (such as CMS), and have unique things to say about these issues deriving from its grounding in the psychological tradition. The challenges faced

by critical W-O psychology are also distinct from those faced by other disciplines, involving conceptual debates around the experience and practice of work that do not entirely match those in CMS. This is to be hoped for, as it would be unfortunate if critical W-O psychology simply reinvented the wheel in its critiques of management and work. Critical W-O psychology can offer alternative avenues of critique, for instance, by enriching critical discussions of experience at work and by offering critical methodological insights for psychology that complement and dialogue with CMS.

This specific disciplinary comparison is intuitive and obvious, given that many people in critical W-O psychology are also involved in the CMS community, work in business schools, and publish in management and organization journals. At the same time, informative (although somewhat more distant) parallels can be drawn between critical W-O psychology and movements in other social sciences. For instance, sociology has had a long-standing tension between positivistic and critical theoretical traditions (cf., Hassard, 1994), although perhaps these might be less asymmetrical than in psychology. Heterodox economics, however, provides an example of how a counter-disciplinary movement can maintain itself in the face of orthodoxy (cf., Lawson, 2006). Rather than remaining as a sub-discipline, fields like cultural studies drew on traditions such as anthropology and the humanities (Silverstone, 1994) to establish an autonomous disciplinary status. Critical W-O psychology should be aware of its place in a more general tradition of heterodox academic disciplinaryity, to be able to best construct its path given its own social and historical circumstances.

In terms of concrete directions, critical W-O psychology can realize its disciplinary potentials through both research-oriented and institutional activities that reinforce its continuity with the W-O psychology tradition while emphasizing its unique contributions to that tradition. In terms of research, thematically

specific topics in W-O psychology can draw on critical work in ways that have not been seen elsewhere and, as noted above, many W-O topics that are less central to the CMS tradition are ripe for critical treatment. For instance, personality and individual differences such as intelligence and aptitude have been mainstays of W-O psychology literature, but while these have often been critiqued for their methodological or theoretical misuses (e.g., Deary et al., 2000), more rare are treatments of the ideological and political foundations of individual difference research (e.g., Emre, 2018; Rose, 1998). As another example, group and team interactions are sites where social controls are established and subjectivities constructed but most W-O literature often treats them in their functional and cognitive-affective implication (cf., Nyein et al., 2020), rather than as micro-sociological laboratories; here again, critical perspectives are sorely needed. These are just two of many possible examples of the areas within W-O psychology that would benefit from a critical research agenda. Similar points could be made around cognitive, affective and behavioral lines of research within W-O psychology.

In terms of the methods and techniques linked to W-O psychology, literature on selection and recruitment in workplace contexts are often focused on technical issues of measurement validity and utility (Sackett & Lievens, 2008); however, such contexts are key moments in the formation of economic and status hierarchies (Dick & Nadin, 2006), and thus rich in potential critical insights that need to be studied. More generally, critical views on measurement and psychometrics can interrogate how the conversion of human relations into data artifacts can be problematic both epistemically and politically (cf., Islam, 2021).

Beyond specific research topics, however, disciplinarity involves complex questions about the organizing of academic fields, and here too critical W-O psychology can place itself as a distinct voice within W-O psychology, rather

than a breakaway group or part of CMS. For instance, recent and upcoming events at the European Association for Work and Organizational Psychology (EAWOP) conference tacitly define critical discussions as within the field, while remaining distinct from traditional paper presentations or symposia, although the unique identity of critical W-O psychology is also being fostered by dedicated stand-alone events.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, upcoming special issues submitted to psychology (rather than management) journals have sought to establish critical dialogues within psychology, and to give opportunities for publication and career-building within psychology departments. From this vantage point of conversation with both critical management and W-O psychology communities, critical work psychologists serve as translators between fields, maintaining disciplinary porosity and promoting interdisciplinary dialogue.

### *Context matters*

Beyond the thematic and disciplinary topics of psychology that provide core themes in critical W-O psychology, the current paper places special emphasis on institutional factors that are likely to shape how, and how easily, critical psychologists achieve their goals. While critical W-O psychology has paid attention to changes in academia and their implications for W-O psychology (Bal et al., 2019), the differences between departmental structures, stakeholders, and resources has not appeared at the forefront of these discussions. One of the reasons that critical W-O psychology has unique things to say vis-à-vis the CMS movement is because of the relative experiences of being in psychology departments in addition to business schools, or as often is the case, moving back and forth between these two institutional homes. Differences between the kinds of financial stakes at play, student profiles and expectations, and collegial backgrounds and discussions in these two settings lead to qualitative differences for critical theorizing, which can become sources

for insights that are different from but in dialogue with CMS.

Among those differences is the inescapable fact that the academic world of 2021 is very different from the early stages of CMS, which began in earnest in the early 1990s (Rowlinson & Hassard, 2011). After 30 years of increasing precaritization, privatization and clientalization of academic teaching and research, critical W-O psychology must deal with an academic world in which many of the core values of academic teaching and research are in question (cf., Jones & O'Doherty, 2005). At the same time, critical perspectives in research and in the classroom may be more needed than ever, as our students and colleagues face the challenge of social crises, whether planned or unplanned. Having the conceptual resources to make sense of relations of injustice, domination and inequality, and their subjective correlates in human experience and behavior, has never been so urgent as at the present time. Thus, an essential part of the critical W-O psychology agenda should be to build theorizing around a historical awareness of the present and remain conscious of the role of psychology within the broader workings of academic institutions and beyond.

This involves recognizing the stakes of promoting critique from the point of view of the present. Both legitimized from 30 years of academic development and assailed by the increasing threats to critical scholarship from institutional and university policies (cf., Grey, 2018), critical scholarship has also become "mainstreamed" in ways that lead to skepticism about its co-optation and lack of social effects (Contu, 2008). Following new social movements that have unfolded during the intervening period, from alter-globalization movements to climate justice movements to intersectional feminist, racial and indigenous movements, it may no longer be helpful for critical scholarship to hang its banner only on the claim to reveal ideologies, but instead should work proactively to imagine new futures and support social action (Bal et al., 2019). Impacting current realities demands more

from the critical project than current scholarship has provided, with the consequence that the current paper, rather than simply reviving critique within psychology, is a call to rethink and reformulate it in yet unseen ways. In this sense, it is essential for W-O psychologists to think of their applied research beyond managerial or human resource settings, to worker organization, activist groups and other sites of practices that are historically overlooked by W-O practitioners.

In short, critical theories are always entangled within the contexts within which they develop. Critique must come from somewhere in particular, and the variety of embodied standpoints is related to the diversity of critical positions that are available. While a critical theory is not reducible to an institutional standpoint, the latter provides resources for theorizing in the form of subjectively felt experiences, available moments for dialogue, exposure to specific concepts and debates. Multiplying these standpoints can provide an opportunity not only for new critical positions, but for insights that can be exchanged with other scholarly communities. One critical scholar's blind spot can become another scholar's research question.

## **Conclusion: The role of critique in the future of W-O psychology**

As a final point, it is worth reflecting on the role of critique vis-à-vis what could broadly be considered "positive" approaches to theory building and testing, not only including epistemological "positivism" but also attempts to build positive science in the sense of a) theories whose goal is to posit, rather than show the limits of, knowledge, and b) theories that help academics and other social actors promote social goods. Given the concern that critical perspectives in psychology may seem overly "negative" to W-O psychology researchers (cf., Kaufman, 2020 for a response), it is important that the role of critique be framed as part of a multi-paradigmatic psychology in which attempts at epistemological diversity, activist-

oriented practical research, and critical research co-exist, checking-and-balancing each other's limitations. Psychologists trying to improve the lives of people in and around workplaces have practical goals, but a myopic focus on specific outcomes obscures the exclusions and politics inherent in practice. Staying aloof from practice in search of objective theorizations obscures the institutional echo-chambers shaping researchers' imaginations. And similarly, critique for its own sake without a concern for knowledge or practice leads to a cynicism ultimately corrosive of the consciousness it seeks to promote. Understood correctly, critique is an important ally of science and action, despite (and because of) its continued unsettling of its surrounding fields.

Furthering a critical theoretical and empirical research agenda within W-O psychology should best be considered as a wider movement for the social good. In this way, it should maintain dialogue with other movements in academia and otherwise, to learn from their experiences while establishing its own vision of psychology for society. This vision must reimagine its place in a changing world of higher education, itself in a changing social-institutional context. That is a lot to keep in mind for a small research community, and a daunting task. Connecting with others who have attempted similar initiatives is one of the ways to meet this challenge, and one of the pleasures of engaging in academic activity. A key message of a socially conscious work psychology may be that reaching for dialogue with others can be one of the best ways to develop our own work.

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### Notes

1. We do not claim that scientism and positivism are equivalent terms, the latter being a philosophical tradition and the former, an institutional use of science as legitimation. However, scientism has often drawn historically on a version of "empirical" positivism that marks early 20th century philosophy of science and has since been abandoned by most positivist philosophy of science (cf., Ackroyd, 2004).
2. Recognizing the multiple variants and evolving nature of capitalism, here we address a broad range of uses of that term as reflected in the extant literature. A more thoroughgoing analysis of this topic would doubtless distinguish these variants more precisely, becoming a useful addition to the critical W-O psychology literature.
3. For instance, in France, the business school "grande école" system is historically distinct from the university, and in Spain and much of Latin America, top business schools are stand-alone organizations that are unaffiliated with universities. In other contexts, such as the U.S. and U.K., business schools may be housed in universities but claim relative autonomy, often marketing themselves with different names than their home university.



4. See also the promotion of critical perspectives within the Future of Work and Organizational Psychology initiative and the activities of the Innsbruck Group on Critical Research in Work and Organizational Psychology.

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