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COMMENTARY

Assessing ideal personalities at work: Is it all just a little bit of history repeating?

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Melson-Silimon, Harris, Shoenfelt, Miller, and Carter (2019) raise an important issue that industrial and organizational (I-O) psychologists should take seriously: As we integrate normal and abnormal personality models, we may find that personality assessments adversely impact the mentally disabled. Though not mentioned by Melson-Silimon and colleagues, this is a criticism of the personality testing enterprise that has been ongoing since its inception in the early 20th century. We would like to use this commentary as an opportunity to focus on the future of personality assessment in employment selection. We call attention to the relevant history of the personality testing enterprise, discuss whether personality testing adversely affects the mentally disabled, and discuss the strategic role I-O psychologists play in this enterprise.

Consider the context surrounding the passage of the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA) of 1935 (for details, see Zickar & Kostek, 2013), which outlawed the practice of asking applicants if they would unionize. During this time, organizational sociologist Elton Mayo claimed that irrational thinking and emotional issues explained poor employee performance and union membership (Zickar & Kostek, 2013). Managers, who were eager to prevent unionization, thus saw personality testing as a means of indirectly flouting the law. Catering to these desires, Doncaster Humm and Guy Wadsworth marketed their Humm–Wadsworth Temperament Test for these purposes (see Zickar & Kostek, 2013). Although this test was designed to identify and help employees or job applicants suffering from a mental disorder, it was used by employers to weed out individuals they believed were union sympathizers (antisocial types) or who were communist ideologues (manic-depressive types; see Emre, 2018). The need for personality testing was exacerbated after 1978 when the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission published the *Uniform Guidelines on Employee Selection*. The *Uniform Guidelines* sparked a search for selection procedures with comparable utility but less adverse impact compared to cognitive ability tests, leading I-O psychologists to personality tests (see Hogan, 2007).

We raise this historical perspective to encourage the I-O psychology community to maintain awareness of the historical context within which we operate. Personality testing has long been criticized by academics, politicians, and also in the popular press (e.g., Emre, 2018) for denying mentally disordered individuals a voice in our society (see Zickar & Kostek, 2013). We must recognize that our actions could be interpreted as yet another attempt to help organizations flout the law, which is clearly not our intention. Rather, we suspect that many within our field will ascribe to an ideal in organizational life that most if not all individuals—regardless of class status (e.g., disability)—can compete for and find a valuable place in our society (e.g., Cascio & Aguinis, 2011). As a profession, our research can inform the sorting process by which individuals find ways to contribute meaningfully to organizations (see Oh, Kim, & Van Iddekinge, 2015) and, therefore, society at large (see Lee & Steel, n.d.).