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ORIGINAL RESEARCH ARTICLE

What Humanitarian Work Psychology brings to Occupational Health Psychology

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Abstract

This paper introduces a newly emerged sub-discipline in work studies – Humanitarian Work Psychology (HWP) – to researchers and practitioners in Occupational Health Psychology (OHP). Focused initially on the eradication of working poverty, under the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), HWP has since its inception contributed to the health and well-being of marginalized workgroups globally. Until today, however, those contributions in HWP have not been integrated with OHP. Key strands in the connecting nexus include how to: (1) set *living wages* that protect occupational and thus wider public health; (2) tackle *infectious diseases* as occupational health hazards; (3) bring valuable and *skilled in*formal work closer into the ambit of OHP; and perhaps the toughest challenge of all, help to (4) combat *unfree work*. OHP is a cross-cutting theme in all four, and we call for broaden-and-build training initiatives and greater supervisor awareness of links not only between HWP and OHP, but also with the wider social sciences and management disciplines including corporate social responsibility, human resources, and policy and public health.

Keywords Humanitarian work psychology · Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) · Working poverty · Decent work · Sustainable livelihoods · Informal economy

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Introduction

The field of occupational health psychology (OHP) focuses on worker health and well-being in the context of organizational functioning. What if we could take well-being further and consider beyond individual well-being nested within organizational systems to whether those very same systems contribute to a broader notion of societal health?

Humanitarian Work Psychology (HWP) does precisely that by expanding well-being in the context of sustainable livelihoods that speak to the changing nature of work (Beier et al., 2025) – for a sustainable planet. Sustainable livelihoods consider well-being as nested *beyond* organizational systems in a Triple bottom line of people, planet, and prosperity. These emphasize making livelihoods, and therefore work, sustainable. This theme of sustainable livelihoods anchors this paper and reveals the unique contribution of HWP to OHP. We provocatively suggest that perhaps OHP needs to expand beyond what may be a reframe of contemporary Industrial and Organizational Psychology (IOP) – to include HWP, which is more closely aligned with, and a fit for, the new and emerging world of work.

Since emerging in the early 2000 s, HWP has focused on eradicating poverty through universal access to conditions of decent work (Saxena, 2018; see also, Carr, 2026). Decent work is inherently protective of, and promotional for, work health and wider well-being (ILO, 1999, 2026). Yet to date no paper has—to our knowledge—systematically considered the *connections* between HWP and OHP and related perspectives. Bridging the two disciplines in this paper has three core aims. First, we aim to introduce more OHP readers to the field of HWP, as both fields are primarily concerned with well-being at, and through, work. Second, we aim to define and explore previously under-recognized intersections between the two fields. In doing so, third, we aim to articulate directions for stimulating new research that advances understanding of occupational well-being and helps to promote it in a more integrated fashion with wider poverty eradication through access to decent work conditions (Thompson & Dahling, 2019).

There have been two main enablers to the emergence of HWP, the first growing out of IOP, and the second seeded by the United Nations' (UN) Human Development Agenda and its consecutive Development Goals. On the first of these enablers, since the turn of the current century, IOP has increased its ethos and ambit, by shifting its 20th-century footing in serving productivity and organizational success towards, in the 21st-century, enhancing the lives and well-being of workers (Tay et al., 2023). It has progressively become more concerned with providing justice to employees at work, with the effects of work on their physical and mental health, the relationship between their work lives and home lives, the role of emotions and emotional processes, diversity and inclusion for people of various ethnic, racial, sexual and neurological orientations. These changes have brought IOP closer to being a person-centric work psychology (Weiss & Rupp, 2011). In the process, an initially small number of IO psychologists were stimulated to call for its application to both absolute and relative poverty. Their reasoning was that if work was central to reducing poverty, then work psychology must have a role to play in reducing it too (Reichman, 2014).

Facilitating that aspirational line of reasoning, coming from outside the discipline itself, have been two successive sets of UN Human Development goals (UN, 2015a, b; ILO, 2016). From 2000 to 2015, one set of eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) focused on reducing poverty through international aid and development work, in lower-income countries and economies (Arora & Mishra, 2019; Bexell & Jönsson, 2017). Since 2016, a much wider and ambitious set of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is now focused on eradicating poverties of opportunity in health, education, environment, economy and in work itself (Bexell & Jönsson, 2017; United Nations, 2015a). These 17 goals call for action by all 193 UN countries, both rich and poor.

At their foundation, the SDGs include removing poverties of opportunity to Good Health and Well-being (SDG-3) and universal access to Decent Work (SDG-8). This was defined in turn by the International Labor Organization (ILO) and the UN. Decent Work:

> "…sums up the aspirations of people in their working lives. It involves opportunities for work that is productive and delivers a fair income; security in the workplace and social protection for all; better prospects for personal development and social integration; freedom for people to express their concerns, organize and participate in the decisions that affect their lives; and equality of opportunity and treatment for all women and men." (ILO, 1999).

This definition is clearly broader than but also implies some core foci in OHP, namely managing psychosocial hazards, safety, and organizational climate, but also extending to wages, careers and enabling voice at work. Decent Work also has four structural 'pillars', named by the ILO as employment creation, social protection (including safe working conditions), rights at work (including labor standards), and social dialogue (including worker voice). Evidently then, Decent Work (with which HWP aligns) shares foci with OHP, and vice versa.

Added to this resonance between OHP and HWP, the latter's *psychological* foundation has oriented HWP, much like it has moved OHP, towards the promotion of work-related subjective well-being (Cunningham & Black, 2021; Ford et al., 2024; Peiró & Tetrick, 2011; Saxena, 2015). Both OHP and HWP further consider work-related health as a key criterion that should be positively influenced via research and practice (Lesener et al., 2020; Saxena & Burke, 2020). Both are furthermore invested in wider community welfare, via decent work, and human well-being (Godbout et al., 2012; Landsbergis et al., 2011; Olson-Buchanan et al., 2013; Rudolph et al., 2021; Spector, 2021).

What then is *distinctive* about *HWP?* In addition to an overt emphasis on poverty and anti-poverty goals, HWP also considers work in both formal-sector jobs and organizations, and in informal-sector work (Saxena, 2017), which is often own-account and/or family-based (Carr, 2026). This wider ambit, into informal labor and beyond formal organizations and jobs, means it places any form of *livelihood*, in any kind of structure or not, within its orbit – from informal artisans in remote rural

communities (Saxena, 2015) to formal factory workers; and from self-employed gig workers and business or social entrepreneurs to victims of trafficking and economic slavery (Hopner, 2024; Mills et al., 2024). Any or all of these are linked through global supply chains, that frequently straddle formal and informal sectors, and workers in each (Carr, 2026; Hopner, 2024). Being inter-connected, all livelihoods are framed through the lens of *sustainability* and the SDGs. In the UN's Sustainability *Agenda*, making Decent Work accessible to all includes making policies that will protect people from crises and disasters of any kind, now and over future generations, by serving a 'triple bottom line'—People, Planet, and Prosperity (Olson-Buchanan et al., 2025). The last two of these three criteria are the most uniquely distinctive to HWP.

How Did We Get Here?

Historically, three main stages in HWP's development to-date have been identified (Carr, 2026). Since each of them is still ongoing and evolving, they form cumulative layers: (1) promoting disaster relief worker well-being; (2) promoting well-being in general, across formal and informal occupations; and (3) most recently, promoting sustainable livelihoods that transcend decent work, to include just transitions, that incorporate SDGs that are focused on preserving the wider ecosystem for future generations (Hopner, 2023, 2026; Hopner & Carr, 2025). A just transition is a people-centered approach to environmental and economic transformation via achieving sustainability goals that ensure workers, communities, and vulnerable populations are protected, included, and able to benefit through decent work, equitable policies, and participatory decision-making (ILO, 2024; UN DESA, 2022).

The first phase concentrated on worker well-being, especially clinical mental health, for international aid workers (Berry et al., 2011). Early seeds of this ethos can be seen in the writings of psychologists who advised the US Peace Corps on how to select and train its international aid workers to minimize stresses and strains of culture shock, not by clinical selection testing but by measuring the situational demands of the work (Harris, 1973; Kealey, 1989). This more IOP line of research then migrated into corporate 'expat' occupational health and wellbeing during the 1990 s (for an authoritative review, see Ward et al., 2001). However, it was reprised by what was to become, after the introduction of the UN 'Millennium' Development Goals (or MDGs) in the 2000 s (Annan, 2000), HWP. Through the 2000 s, key meetings were held at SIOP in 2008 (see, Reichman, 2014) and at University College London in 2009, at which the name 'Humanitarian Work Psychology' (and its acronym 'HWP') was first coined (by J. Godbout; see Carr et al., 2012). There and in later HWP research and advocacy, a more inclusive approach to aid work foregrounded not just 'expat' but rather the *inequalities* between expatriate and host country national work conditions, and their impact on worker stress, strain, and well-being (Marai, 2014; Marai et al., 2010; McWha-Hermann et al., 2016). Thus, today this layer of HWP includes topics like workplace (in)justice and organizational stressors on disaster relief workers, including people working in food bank services globally (Carr, 2026).

A second phase of development in HWP came with the advent of the second round of UN human development objectives, the 'Sustainable' Development Goals (SDGs;

2016–30). Shifting terminology from 'Development' to 'Sustainable' goals reflected the realization that poverty was not just an issue for "developing" countries, and for international aid from the "developed" ones. Access to decent work was also an issue for the entire world of work—in which working poverty and precarity were on the rise. HWP's ambit therefore now changed as well, from focusing on (i) supporting aid sector work to (ii) making work-in-general, independently of sector, organization, occupation etc., more Humanitarian – in effect, Decent. During this period, HWP pivoted into research and advocacy about the psychology of wages, and their function of protecting workers from financial stressors and strains (Sinclair et al., 2025) including the rising cost of living and being caught in working poverty traps (Project GLOW, 2020).

During the 2020 s, it became evident that Decent Work needed to be expanded to include the increasingly self-evident and growing *environmental* crisis we all face. Accordingly, HWP too has expanded its focus (Olson-Buchanan et al., 2025), for example to include just transitions that leave no-one behind (Hopner & Carr, 2026). This meant supporting workers transitioning from carbon-intensive forms of energy production and processing to more eco-friendly, but also safer workplaces (Burke et al., 2025; Kelloway & Agnihotri, 2025; Saxena, 2023). A recent example of what this support may look like is indexing the livelihood career choices that are most likely to deliver, for school-leavers and workers seeking just transitions, sustainable livelihoods (Carr et al., 2025a, 2025b, 2025c).

'Sustainable livelihoods' are defined operationally as supporting (1) people and (2) planet, by meeting the cost-of-living and protecting the ecosystem for present and for future generations (Carr, 2023, 2026). Beyond (1) and (2), is (3) prosperity, which must be attained without costs to occupational health and well-being, now and in the future. The lens of sustainable livelihoods in HWP considers prosperity at the societal level.

The triple bottom line concept emphasizes the idea that people, planet, and prosperity are interconnected such that achieving one goal is not enough; each is connected to the next, and the one after, such that achieving one cannot be purchased at the cost of another (ILO, 2017a; UNCTAD, 2023). There is a balance to be struck across SDGs, and Sustainability, as a multi-faceted agenda. Evidently, decent work does not automatically mean livelihood *sustainability*, indeed it may even mean the opposite over the mid- to longer-term. Fishing that destroys fish stocks, no matter how safe the immediate work environment for the fishers, will nonetheless become more precarious, insecure, and stressful – and will eventually self-atrophy and die. HWP is therefore focusing on *balancing* SDGs, such that gains on the one hand are not paid for by losses, to health or well-being, on the other. HWP argues *against* preserving jobs and other forms of livelihood that are, in the longer run and in terms of the greater social and environmental good, unsustainable.

The key point here is that HWP considers decent work in the context of multi-faceted sustainability. Another way of thinking about HWP and OHP, is that OHP, like IOP, relies on Systems theory – by considering individual workers within systems of teams, departments, organizations and to some extent, occupations, industries, and national cultures. HWP extends this systems perspective further, encompassing broader societal and ecological systems and, ultimately, planetary sustainability.

Table 1 Summary table

	IOP	OHP	HWP
Primary Gaze	Organizational Performance & Commitment	Individual Occupational Health & Well-being	People, Planet, Prosperity
Application Goals	Efficiency & Resilience	Safety & Protection from Harm	Eradication of Poverty
Radius of Analysis	Organization	Occupation	Ecosystem

HWP represents an extension of traditional approaches to work and worker well-being Table 1. Although HWP and OHP share a concern with worker well-being, HWP explicitly centers sustainability, incorporating issues of environmental impact, decent work, and sustainable livelihoods. In doing so, it extends attention to broader systems, including planetary health, societal and cultural contexts, and public policy.

The field and discipline of HWP have thereby grown, and continued to grow, in at least two main ways (Jimenez & Saxena, 2018; Mullins & Olson-Buchanan, 2023). Academically, HWP has generated hundreds of research articles, special issues of journals, both in applied psychology and in several other disciplines, including Sustainability Sciences outlets (EAWOP, 2023a; Meyer et al., 2018; SIOP, 2016; Teng-Calleja & Meyer, 2023). Process-wise, HWP has built a community of applied practice via cross-sector small group meetings (EAWOP, 2020a, 2020b, 2023b; SIOP, 2016), handbooks (Carr et al., 2012, 2023; McWha-Hermann et al., 2016; Olson-Buchanan et al., 2013, 2025), and handbook chapters (e.g., Gloss & Thompson, 2013; Lefkowitz, 2012; Reichman & Berry, 2012; Saxena, 2015, 2018, 2023). So far however, HWP has not connected with OHP. With that possibility in mind, we now illustrate some research that has OH at its core.

Intersections Connect Us

(1) Setting Minimum and Maximum Wages for Occupational and Public Health

Human health, both within and through work, is integral to economic processes (Shoss, 2025). A study of 24 countries in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development linked human health, over a span of three decades, to the "generosity of minimum wages" (Lenhart, 2017, p. 1031).[1] Level of wage generosity correlated with mortality rates, early death through onset of diabetes, diseases of circulation and strokes through unmet medical needs, consumption of tobacco, intakes of calories (for example, from fast food) and the probability of people being overweight. Each of these was over-represented among low-waged workers and those with lower socio-economic status (Lenhart, 2017).

Across North America, the United Kingdom, and Europe, lower minimum wages are associated with a range of adverse physical and mental health and well-being outcomes, affecting both workers and those around them (Leigh et al., 2019). These

[1] Captured in a ratio between minimum and average wage times no. of workers earning the minimum (Kaitz Index).

include child maltreatment rates, infant birthweight, mortality rates, and adolescent birth rates. Conversely, countries that raised their minimum wage above federal level had comparatively lower rates of premature death from suicide amongst people with a non-college education (Kaufman et al., 2020). Overall, minimum wage levels are linked to health at and at least partly through work, into wider public health outcomes (Lebihan, 2023).

Humanitarian Work Psychology has extensively plotted fluctuations in wage levels—from the legal minimum wage as the baseline—against fluctuations in subjective well-being (Project GLOW, 2020). The latter were measured for example through job satisfaction, happiness at work, occupational stress, anxiety, depression, and holistic well-being, and work-life balance (Haar et al., 2018). This approach *derives inductively* the point at which wages *psychologically* tended to either succeed in or fail to safeguard health and well-being. These relationships are consistently nonlinear rather than a simple function of wage levels (Project GLOW, 2020).

At minimum wage, people tend to report poor health and well-being. As minimum wage baselines go up, people's ill-being tends to reduce (becomes marginally less bad) but still falls short of well-being (i.e., there remains dissatisfaction not satisfaction; distress not eustress; imbalance rather than balance) (Diener & Seligman, 2004; Neumark, 2024). It is when wage levels reach the national living wage threshold, that satisfaction, eustress, and such meaningfully positive states tend to replace dissatisfaction, distress, and similar adverse states of being (Yao et al., 2017). Such qualitative transformations, from ill-being to well-being (Searle & McWha-Hermann, 2020a, 2020b) are vital because living wages, unlike minimum wages, are an organizational *choice*. Accordingly, understanding how wage levels shape occupational health and well-being—and what constitutes an adequate wage from a worker health perspective—represents an important question for OHP (Khuller, 2018; Project GLOW, 2020).

This connection is important because HWP living wage research, in collaboration with a range of OHP, IOP, HRM (Human Resource Management), civil society groups and other professions has directly contributed to real policy changes that have lifted minimum wages to living levels. For instance, during the pandemic, a municipal council in New Zealand raised its living wage to help people through the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond (Carr et al., 2025a, 2025b, 2025c). In this case, the city council eventually voted to move to living wages after hearing HWP research and the voices of HRM professionals from living wage employers. This was an arguably bold decision in a time of threats to both lives and livelihoods, and similar cases of collaborative connections have been documented in Scotland and South Africa (Carr et al., 2025a, 2025b, 2025c).

Foregrounding poverty in this way further reveals a fundamental distinction between OHP and HWP. Much in OHP wants to end economic stress (Sinclair et al., 2025), which among many strategies could include higher wages, a core topic from HWP (Project GLOW, 2020). Alleviating economic stress does not in itself constitute poverty alleviation; integrating HWP and OHP offers a means of connecting worker-level economic stress with the broader structural conditions that shape poverty. Important too in such collaborations is keeping the whole wage table in sight, as part of the wage justice/well-being equation: the amount of money available for wages

to be paid to the bottom of any wage table, and to the average worker, is a function of the amount of money paid out to the top (Carr, 2023). Disproportionately high executive compensation can constrain the share of organizational resources available for wages among lower- and middle-income workers, thereby contributing to greater wage inequality (ILO, 2013).

Reprising earlier themes of wage inequality in aid work (phase 1 above), recently HWP has also begun to address the issue of wage inequality within all forms of organization and their global supply chains. Following advice from the ILO (2013) that a key predictor of well-being is the *ratio* between CEO (Chief Executive Officer) and minimum wage on the denominator, HWP scholars have advocated for this denominator as the living wage, since the minimum wage often still leaves people struggling to make ends meet (Carr et al., 2025a, 2025b, 2025c). One might argue that CEO compensation is of limited relevance if workers receive a living wage consistent with national standards. However, the ILO (2013) showed that very high CEO wages take from the organizational wage fund, thereby depleting the wages available for the shop-floor, indirectly contributing to working poverty and precarity. A new frontier for researchers in HWP and OHP could thus be maximum wage ratios and their impacts on health and well-being across the workforce.

Establishing worker well-being as a basis for wages exceeding statutory minimums presents both conceptual and practical challenges. One supporting argument is that the well-being indicators associated with living wages in Haar et al. (2018), including job satisfaction and work–life balance, are collectively associated with productivity at both the individual and occupational levels (Carr, 2023). In other words, paying living wages may yield complementary benefits for both occupational health and organizational performance. Intersections like this are likely to make the case for wage reform, inside any organization, municipal to corporate, more practicable to make and represent a ripe area for continued research and active collaboration across OHP and HWP.

(2) Tackling Infectious Diseases as Occupational Health Hazards

MDG 6 and, subsequently, SDG 3 placed infectious disease firmly on the global development agenda. Considerable attention has focused on HIV/AIDS (Grant & De Cock, 1998, 2001; Hargreaves & Glynn, 2002; Jha et al., 2001; Kennedy et al., 2007; Yu et al., 2008), malaria (Del Prado et al., 2014; Mwenesi, 2005; Rosenthal et al., 2019), and dengue (Erlanger et al., 2008; Mahoney, 2014; Monath, 1994). Other infectious diseases, however, also impose substantial mortality and disease burdens while receiving comparatively less attention, particularly as occupational health hazards.

Japanese encephalitis is a mosquito-borne disease (Solomon et al., 2000) associated with substantial morbidity and mortality among low-income populations in northern India (Kabilan et al., 2004; Leeder, 2007; Nicoletti, 2020). Rice-farming communities are particularly vulnerable during the annual monsoon season (Baruah et al., 2018; Kumari & Joshi, 2012; Samuel et al., 2016). Saxena (2015) investigated why the disease remained endemic among these agricultural workers through a multidisciplinary approach at the intersection of HWP and OHP.

The research required methodological adaptation. Participants had limited literacy and little exposure to digital technologies, making conventional smartphone- or paper-based Experience Sampling Methods (ESM) difficult to implement (Milesi et al., 2017; Thomas & Azmitia, 2016; Wright et al., 2020). Saxena (2015) therefore adapted ESM to the local rural and cultural context, using open-ended responses and repeated observations across multiple time points to capture interactions among work, everyday activities, cultural practices, and disease-exposing behaviors.

This approach revealed an important occupational health mechanism. Agricultural work practices and culturally embedded daily routines coincided with mosquito biting and feeding patterns. Activities integral to rice cultivation, such as watering and wading in fields at particular times of day, consequently increased workers' exposure to mosquito bites and Japanese encephalitis (Saxena, 2015). The occupational hazard therefore arose not simply from the presence of mosquitoes, but from the intersection of work practices, cultural routines, local ecology, and the timing of disease-vector exposure.

Crucially, these findings were translated into a policy brief that informed occupational health actions by local community panchayats and government stakeholders (Saxena & Burke, 2020). This translation was particularly important for a disease whose burden is geographically concentrated and may consequently attract less national and international attention than more globally prominent diseases. The policy brief outlined accessible, locally implementable strategies across three stages: preventing exposure before the monsoon season, mitigating and controlling disease once the season began, and strengthening education and awareness to help agricultural workers protect themselves, their families, and their communities (Saxena & Burke, 2020; see Jyoti & Arora, 2023, for a related argument concerning plantation and garment-sector workers).

The case illustrates the value of bringing HWP and OHP into closer dialogue. The connections among occupational hazards, cultural practices, work behaviors, and disease-vector exposure represent phenomena that have received comparatively limited attention within work and organizational psychology (Gloss et al., 2017). HWP situates occupational health within the wider cultural, socioeconomic, and environmental contexts in which work occurs, enabling OHP concepts and methods to be adapted and extended to occupational groups and settings that may otherwise receive less attention. OHP, in turn, offers established expertise for identifying, understanding, and addressing risks to worker health. In this case, their integration generated both novel empirical insights and practical interventions for a low-income agricultural community.

Across the exemplars considered thus far, the contribution of HWP to OHP is therefore not to replace its established focus, but to extend its reach. By bringing greater attention to marginalized occupational groups and the contexts in which their work is embedded, HWP can complement OHP in advancing occupational health across a broader range of workers, forms of work, and settings.

(3) Work in the Informal Economy and Negative Occupational Stereotypes

Vulnerable work is a term often used by the World Bank (2026) and others (ILO, 2026; United Nations, 2015c) to describe poor quality and insecure work in the majority informal economy. The burden of the informal economy is largely borne

by countries that rate lower on economic development indices (Blades et al., 2011) and where people suffer from a variety of other development-related issues including poor health, crime, poor levels of education, healthcare and medical access (Glewwe & Kremer, 2006; Stevens & Huys, 2017). Decent work is of utmost importance in the informal economy where large numbers of workers are vulnerable to exploitation, poor and unfair pay, lack of benefits, protections, voice, and consequent neglect and marginalization (ILO, 2026; Saxena, 2017, 2021; Saxena & Tchagnéno, 2023).

There is a risk of characterizing the informal economy in uniformly negative terms based on assumptions that informal work is inherently exploitative, precarious, or undesirable. Such assumptions may extend to the workers themselves, who are frequently characterized as low-skilled or unskilled (Amaral & Quintin, 2006; Fuller, 2008), despite possessing considerable expertise that may be recognized and valued differently across cultural and historical contexts. HWP scholarship has highlighted how such deficit-oriented characterizations of marginalized workers can become embedded within both research and policy (Saxena & Tchagnéno, 2023).

Contrary to prevailing stereotypes, HWP research on skilled workers in the informal economy has identified important dimensions of decency and dignity in such work (see Saxena, 2017, 2021). Research with highly skilled informal workers in remote rural India found that, despite conditions of severe poverty, workers demonstrated high levels of intrinsic motivation and skill, derived enjoyment from their work, and experienced states of flow while engaging in traditional occupations rooted in centuries of cultural and occupational history (Saxena, 2021).

However, due to long hours of sitting/standing and carrying excessively high amounts of weight, participants became predisposed to musculoskeletal (Gallagher & Schall, 2020), neural (Short & Baram, 2019), and anatomical conditions, such as hunched back, gout, arthritis, and physical weakness (Bakhsh & Nicandri, 2018; Cambré et al., 2018; Towiwat et al., 2019). While abundant research in OHP focuses on occupational safety and health of workers across different industries (Barling et al., 2002; Sauter & Hurrell, 1999; Zanko & Dawson, 2012), the explicit focus of the informal economy research described above has led to multiple discoveries (i.e., sustainable work, flow, the connection with nature). Ultimately, such an explicit focus in the research described above led to more inclusive occupational health outcomes for previously overlooked occupational groups (Saxena, 2015, 2023; Saxena & Tchagnéno, 2023), a theme that has become central to HWP (Carr, 2026).

Research informed by HWP principles may therefore help challenge and redress prejudices toward informal workers, advance dignity and decent work within the informal economy (Kuhn, 2016; Saxena, 2023) and bring greater attention to the occupational health needs of workers who have historically received less scholarly attention. Although work in the informal economy remains relatively underexamined within OHP, it offers important opportunities to extend existing understandings of work, health, and well-being across diverse contexts. In this way, HWP offers a complementary perspective that can broaden OHP's already substantial contributions to understanding worker health and well-being by extending attention to workers and forms of work that have received comparatively less consideration.

The contemporary world of work is being reshaped by automation, generative AI, and emerging concerns surrounding digital human rights (Khazanchi & Saxena, 2025). These transformations may contribute to the expansion of informal and gig work mediated through digital and internet-based platforms, potentially exposing workers to greater occupational uncertainty and precarity. An important question, therefore, is how HWP and OHP can respond to the occupational health needs of workers navigating these emerging forms of work.

One emerging HWP approach involves the development of protocols for indexing the quality of livelihoods across both formal and informal economies, using criteria that include their capacity to deliver, protect, and promote health (Carr et al., 2025a, 2025b, 2025c). Such protocols could serve as uncertainty- and risk-reducing navigational aids for individuals making school-to-work and work-to-work transitions (Deloitte, 2025). Their utility may also extend to organizations and sectors by creating incentives to improve the quality of the livelihoods they support—for example, through strengthening occupational health conditions across supply chains that extend into the informal economy.

(4) Human Security, Health and Well-being at Work

Turning to the darkest side of informal work, modern slavery or unfree work arises from processes of abduction, deception, fraud, and all other "situations of exploitation that a person cannot refuse or leave because of threats, violence, coercion, deception, and/or abuse of power" (ILO, 2017b, p. 9). Unfree work includes a range of forced and coercive labor practices including, chattel slavery, human trafficking, debt bondage, state-imposed labor, forced marriage and forced soldiering (Fuller, 2019). In 2021, the ILO estimated that approximately 50 million people worldwide were living in situations of modern slavery, including 27.6 million in forced labor and 22 million in forced marriage (ILO, 2021).

In which sectors is unfree work found? It is estimated that the 27.5 million people trapped in unfree work labor in (1) the private sector (17.3 million), (2) in commercial and sexual exploitation (6.3 million) and (3) under government oversight (3.9 million) (ILO, 2021). Typically, this labor exploitation takes place across industries like fishing, forestry, agriculture, construction, textile, mining, manufacturing and domestic servitude (Zimmerman et al., 2011). Of the approximately 1.2 million people incarcerated in U.S. state and federal prisons, an estimated 791,500 are engaged in some form of prison labor (ACLU & GHRC, 2022). This includes state prison industries, public works, community service, and direct or indirect convict leasing arrangements to private corporations (ACLU & GHRC, 2022). Prisoners are largely excluded from further protections that set standards around safe and healthy working conditions enabled through the Occupational Safety and Health Act (OSH Act) (ACLU & GHRC, 2022).

How can OHP practitioners become more involved in combating unfree work? One avenue is to advocate for organizational adoption of established Codes of Conduct that formalize due diligence across supply chains (Caruana et al.,

2021), supported by standardized auditing and certification processes that extend accountability for sustainable practices beyond suppliers to the organizations that contract with and benefit from them (LeBaron, 2020). Codes such as the United Nations Global Compact (United Nations Global Compact, 2026), for instance, offers 10 structuring principles for corporate sustainability, focused on human rights, safe environments at work and anti-corruption to establish 'cultures of integrity' across your supply chains (https://unglobalcompact.org/what-is-gc/mission/principles). The United States has increasingly employed import restrictions as a mechanism for addressing forced labor in global supply chains, including restrictions on goods produced through forced or prison labor in China (Congressional Research Service, 2026).

The Worker Rights Consortium (Ross, 2017) and Free2Work (Not For Sale, & International Labor Rights Forum, 2011) issue whistle-blowing advisories on bad actor employers to employees and consumers, respectively. Large multinational companies can establish and enforce supplier standards prohibiting unfree work throughout their supply chains, including at more distal stages of production (Fuller, 2019). Companies can further deploy smart technology, such as confidential free mobile channels on factory floors, to enable safe whistle-blowing, e.g., on suppliers relying on slave labor, by employees (Carr, 2023; Saner & Yiu, 2012).

How can OHP researchers gain access to samples of unfree and marginalized workers, and what types of research questions are pressing? Conducting research directly with unfree workers is likely to be extremely difficult, potentially dangerous, ethically challenging, and often impractical. Major UN agencies such as the ILO are better resourced and positioned to conduct such direct research and yet, it tends to be rare. Indirect research however could include (for instance) document analyses of slavery reports, some of which include surveys of and interviews with hard-to-reach groups (Carr, 2023). Examining existing training programs for workforces specifically tasked with detecting unfree work, such as border security personnel and law enforcement, offers another avenue for meaningful and comparatively safe research. For example, research might examine which forms of training are most effective in supporting both the health and safety of these professionals and their effectiveness in identifying and responding to unfree work (ILO, 2025). In these ways, collaborating with *other* disciplines to provide an OHP/HWP perspective on combating unfree work could make a difference.

Future Research and Practice Directions

Each of the core issues identified above suggests important directions for future research that center on forging wider partnerships beyond OH and HWP with professionals across CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility), HRM, epidemiology, ethnography, social anthropology, and police and security forces. Below we provide examples of future research and practice that can serve as guiding posts and pathways for such collaborative work.

Setting Healthier Wages

Evidence from public health research has shown the link between minimum wages and health, and HWP in turn has linked wages to well-being. However, most organizations still do not actively consider the benefits of increasing and setting fair minimum wage levels, where both employee OHP and employer margins are safeguarded (Teng-Calleja et al., 2021). Addressing these issues would require interdisciplinary collaboration among OHP/HWP, HRM, labor unions, wage economists, job evaluation specialists, and remuneration consultants, across both research and practice (Project GLOW, 2020). HWP has also documented a role for media collaborations, with professionals in both animation and gamification, in conveying the importance of earning a decent living wage (Carr et al., 2025a, 2025b, 2025c).

Tackling Infectious Diseases

A partnership between methods, theories, and training from HWP and OHP, combined with epidemiology, ethnography and anthropology, could help build capacity to address crises such as infectious diseases for the future. By identifying points in the work cycle where infection risks are enhanced and reduced, job redesign could then be re-applied to help keep workers safer. In this case, as in the previous example, OHP becomes a cross-cutting priority that connects these otherwise diverse and often compartmentalized approaches. Participants in Saxena's (2015, 2021) research could not read or write. They were difficult to get to, physically. But they were reached, and through a creative amalgam of HWP with epidemiological and with other approaches, their work could be redesigned to be safer, healthier, and thereby more resilient. Policies were changed; and work was improved to be more socially and culturally protective and inclusive (Saxena & Burke, 2020).

Beyond Evaluating Just Transitions

What are the occupational health risks, challenges, and hazards experienced by those in skilled occupations (such as intergenerational artisans) in the informal economy? Answering this question may help to support at-risk workers who may be most in need of OHP interventions. Similarly, thorough evaluations of understudied occupations and the cultural value they bring to society as-a-whole can reveal occupations that are most at risk from automated mass production. In keeping with these suggestions, we recommend the inclusion of OHP impact inside composite indexes that identify most-to-least sustainable forms of livelihood, i.e., include OHP indicators as aspects of sustainable livelihoods (Carr et al., 2025a, 2025b, 2025c; Hopner et al., 2026). What indicators from OHP are the most important to include in reliable and valid calibrations of the 'people' criterion in the triple bottom line? Does well-being at work factually improve, significantly, when the just transition partly based on it is completed?

Securing Freer Work

The very nature of unfree work, trafficking and economic slavery, is clandestine, and dangerous. Conventional research methods, such as surveys, may be ill-suited to this context. Moreover, participant stakeholders engaged in such work may constitute hidden or difficult-to-reach populations, presenting significant ethical and safety considerations for both workers and researchers. More accessible to researchers, however, may be the occupational groups tasked with identifying and combating illicit and exploitative forms of work, including unfree work. These workforces must have their own OHP protected but also have the potential to benefit the OHP of victims of unfree work. What training factors, and what forms of supervision, are more likely to lead to more occupational success for these workers, as well as the OHP of those whose liberties have otherwise been lost? An additional, and often comparatively neglected, consideration within IOP—and perhaps to some extent within OHP—is wages. Frequently relegated to the pecuniary domain in favor of more psychological accounts of work, living wages constitute a critical protective factor against vulnerability to trafficking, forced labor, and environmentally harmful forms of work (Hopner, 2023, 2026; Hopner & Carr, 2026).

Collaborating on Research and Publications

As the preceding discussion demonstrates, most of the issues we address in this paper will require multidisciplinary collaborations among scholars across research communities. One strategy for such collaborations is guest-edited special issues that spur cross-disciplinary research agendas. These are often seeded by conference symposia, not just in OHP or HWP, but often through multidisciplinary, and preferably transdisciplinary meetings and forums.

HWP brings significant difficulty to research, which may be difficult to reconcile with the pressures academics face under the prevailing 'publish-or-perish' model. In addition, there is the relative difficulty of publishing this research in high-ranking journal outlets. The argument that tends to be made is the uniqueness of the context that makes it non-generalizable. However, we argue that it is this unique context that can make such research ground-breaking and potentially support crossing new frontiers for our field as-a-whole. The academics who might be well-poised to conduct this research might be faculty at universities with lower research pressure, full professors who are looking for more legacy-building than publication counts, and those driven by passion. Equally however, the rise of working poverty and the global cost-of-living crisis have moved the issue of decent work conditions and their role in promoting sustainable livelihoods more into the 'mainstream' in recent years (Carr et al., 2023, 2024).

Alternatively, there may be ways to keep publication counts high while doing this research, including by collaborating across disciplines and aiming for more innovative breaks that will find a publishing home in the new, and often open access, sustainability journals. Many institutions have APC (Article Processing Charge) fee waiver options with these journals, which means that researchers who are ideas-rich

but resource-poor, can have outreach and impact in the occupational health sphere, when working across transdisciplinary and transversal teams.

Conclusion

Arguably, OHP came about from focusing not on the work, but on the worker, whereas HWP came about from focusing on sustainability, meaning freedom from poverty of opportunity. Both pathways led to a convergent focus on worker well-being as a critical outcome (Tay et al., 2023). This focus on worker well-being is not without precedent in broader IOP, but IOP still tends to be more focused on job performance/productivity as the 'ultimate criterion.' There are clear challenges to conducting HWP research, and we considered how they have been and often could be overcome. HWP offers OHP researchers opportunities to extend established research approaches to a wider range of worker populations, including those less readily accessible through conventional research settings. The need to broaden the populations represented in psychological research is not new, nor is it unique to HWP (e.g., Gloss et al., 2017; Henrich et al., 2010a, 2010b). Nevertheless, HWP reinforces this imperative in ways that may help inspire the next generation of OHP researchers and practitioners. Importantly, such efforts also call for collaboration beyond HWP and OHP. Given the breadth of the contexts and challenges encompassed by HWP, rigorous research will often require interdisciplinary partnerships that bring expertise not traditionally housed within either field. Direct engagement between HWP and OHP on these topics could spur such lines of research and joint activity, and conference forums and task forces may be a viable avenue for such pursuits. In that same spirit, we would welcome commentaries and feedback on the ideas, suggestions, and perhaps provocations in this article.

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