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COMMENTARY

The circle of science: Applying circular economy principles to I-O psychology research and academia

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In their focal article, Schilling et al. (2026) examine how I-O psychology can contribute to advancing circular economy (CE) approaches. In this commentary, we mirror and extend this perspective by suggesting that the underlying logic of the CE—*reduce*, *reuse*, and *recycle*—can also beneficially apply to I-O psychology research and our behavior as researchers. Specifically, we propose conceptualizing I-O psychology as embedded in a CE of knowledge production rather than an end-of-life economy, as is often the case in current practice. We argue that adopting a CE perspective can help address persistent challenges in the field—such as limited relevance for organizational strategies, questionable research practices, and the replication crisis—by offering practical guidelines for more sustainable research.

End-of-life characteristics in current I-O psychology research practice

The products of I-O psychology research industry could be understood in terms of insight into novel phenomena relevant to individuals in organizations. An optimistic perspective on the life cycle of those phenomena is provided by Hunt (1999) who proposed three stages: (1) concept introduction and elaboration, (2) concept assessment and augmentation, and (3) concept consolidation and accommodation. Therefore, ideally, our research industry introduces a new concept, subsequently evaluates and refines it through empirical testing and theoretical elaboration, and eventually integrates it into the broader body of knowledge, as its core propositions become consolidated and adapted to related research domains.

However, a less optimistic—and perhaps more realistic—perspective on the life cycle of concepts is offered by Alvesson and Einola (in Gardner et al., 2021). They argue that concepts often enter an escalation of critique, become the subject of discussions about their limitations, and are eventually left behind as most advocates move on to new, more "megatrend topics" and seemingly promising ideas. Alvesson and Einola conclude that "concepts [in our field] do not tend to evolve successfully—and there are many of them left 'hanging'" (Gardner et al., 2021, p. 6). The comparison to a linear business model is apparent: current research practices resemble a linear process in which concepts are created, briefly developed, and quickly discarded. In fact, most (79%) of new concepts in psychology are not reused more than twice (Anvari et al., 2025). Beyond concept development, research insights rarely translate into practice, suggesting that the intellectual effort invested in producing knowledge often leads to little real-world use (Negt & Haunschild, 2025; Voss et al., 2025). Therefore, much like other linear economic processes, the current academic end-of-life approach risks wasting substantial financial and intellectual resources (see Schilling et al., 2026).

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A circular economy perspective on I-O psychology research

We argue that the three core CE principles, *reduce*, *reuse*, and *recycle*, may help to transform I-O psychology research from this end-of-life principle to a circular system of knowledge production. First, reduce: We interpret *reduce* as a quality-over-quantity approach (Alleva, 2006, Frith, 2020). In a rapidly changing world of work, research on new organizational phenomena is undoubtedly important—but what seems equally important is collectively pulling in the same direction. Yet research efforts are often fragmented. Traditionally, individuals study similar phenomena independently rather than pooling efforts (see Wuchty et al., 2007). Collaborative approaches (multistudy papers, interdisciplinary multilab collaborations, or living studies) may tackle this problem. For instance, rather than multiple research groups independently studying the same phenomenon and each publishing separate first-authored articles, a collaborative approach could involve pooling efforts into a multilab study that provides more robust and generalizable evidence. Yet, the current hypercompetitive, publish-or-perish system provides few incentives for such work, as the outcome may be a single paper with more than 30 coauthors, whereas the alternative could be 30 separate first-authored publications. As a result, these approaches remain rare in I-O psychology.

A similar reduced, quality-over-quantity logic may also apply to theory building. Rather than producing overspecified and narrowly tested models for specific contexts, the field would benefit from parsimonious theories capable of explaining multiple phenomena within I-O psychology and beyond. For practitioners in particular, a smaller number of clear, rigorously tested, and broadly as well as interdisciplinary applicable theories are more valuable than a constant stream of new, disconnected theories and concepts. Failing to adopt such a parsimonious approach risks widening the science-practice gap and reinforcing perceptions of I-O psychology's limited relevance for organizational practice (Aguinis et al., 2020).

Second, reuse: We understand *reuse* as research consistency, revisiting results, data reuse, and the accumulation of insights. I-O psychology may benefit from focusing on established theories and research streams rather than constantly introducing new ideas and concepts (Bowling et al., 2026). Testing existing theories and replicating those is central to the development of settled evidence and unified evidence base across contexts. Hence, we argue that replication and theory testing also make valuable contributions to the literature, alongside the development of genuinely *new* theories and theory specifications (Aguinis & Cronin, 2026; Shaver, 2020).

We also see strong arguments for the reuse and sharing of existing data (e.g., Hüffmeier & Mertes, 2023). Data collection is a resource-intensive process that requires substantial time and effort from both participants and researchers. In alignment with a more sustainable CE logic, valuable, high-quality data should therefore be reused and/or reanalyzed. Moreover, nonsignificant results are often discarded as causally untrue effects, yet they are an important part of the overall evidence base and should be reused for meta-analytic research (see Franco et al., 2014, Siegel et al., 2022) or to inform meaningful sample sizes in future research (Lakens, 2022). Open science practices such as preregistration, registered reports, and results-blind reviews may help ensure scientific integrity and the publication of nonsignificant results (Aguinis & Cronin, 2026; Hüffmeier et al., 2022; Torka et al., 2023).

Third, recycle: Falsified theories and nonreplicable effects should be discarded. Nevertheless, we suggest *recycling* useful elements of outdated research. When developing new theories, scholars do not have to restart theorizing from scratch. Components of falsified or abandoned theories may still contain valid insights that could be reintegrated into new theoretical frameworks, whereas concept names should remain consistent to preserve parsimony and transparency. Such transparent recycling could strengthen progress in I-O research and prevent theorizing that merely repackages existing ideas as old wine in new bottles.

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Call for action

By adopting the three Rs in I-O psychology research, we offer a unified framework that consolidates existing sustainable research practices into concise guidelines for steering the field toward greater sustainability. We are certainly not the first to highlight these issues, and the solutions proposed in this commentary are not new. However, little appears to have changed (Aguinis et al., 2020; Hüffmeier & Mertes, 2023, Shaver, 2020). Therefore, in this comment, we echo and renew these calls for scientific best practices in I-O psychology research. Principles of CE, such as *reduce, reuse, recycle,* and collaboration (Schilling et al.), can be translated into openness and transparency in research, open data, high-quality research with rigorous methodology and sound samples, and stronger scientific collaborative research practices. In addition, the availability of specialized I-O outlets can contribute to transitioning to a circular knowledge production. Rather than uniformly prioritizing theory, a better-coordinated portfolio of I-O psychology journals could differ in their focus on theoretical or practical contributions, supporting a more circular knowledge production process—from insight generation to application (for an illustrative example, see the *Academy of Management* journal portfolio reflecting this logic; Cronin et al., 2025). Authors need not address all audiences in one paper but clarify the manuscript's role within the broader knowledge cycle. Greater cooperation and specialization across I-O psychology journals may therefore support more sustainable, CE-oriented research practices.

Taken together, in addition to asking, "How can we, as I-O researchers, study the effects of a circular economy?" (Schilling et al.), we should also consider asking, "How can we transform our research industry towards a sustainable circular economy?" Embracing the three Rs and CE thinking may help reframe our research industry as a circular process, allowing I-O psychology, as well as other disciplines such as management research and scientific psychology in general, to meaningfully support a more sustainable future.

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