A Conversation with Irvin Schonfeld

Charting Your Own Course: Diverse Paths to Occupational Health Psychology

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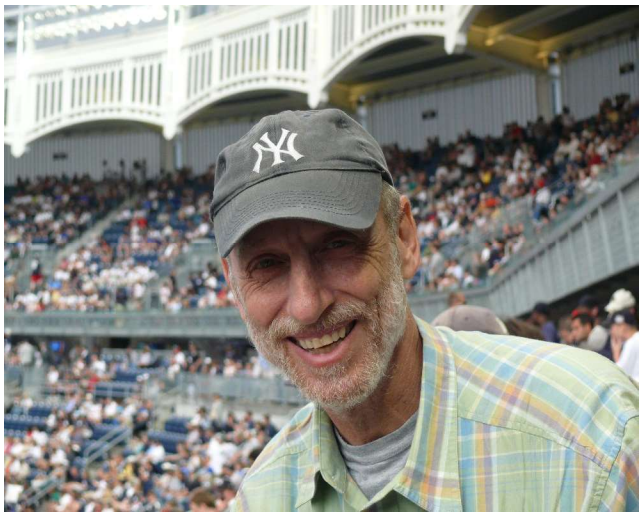


Tell us about your career.

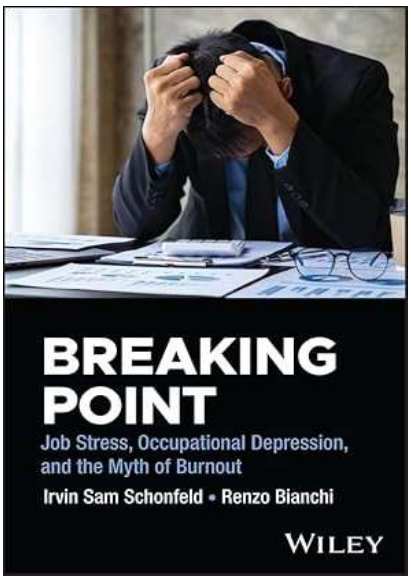
Unlike many members of the OHP community, I did not specialize in I-O psychology. My route into OHP was closely linked to my working experience outside of academia, as I will explain. I earned a B.S. at Brooklyn College where I majored in psychology and minored in mathematics. After graduating I taught mathematics in a dangerous New York City public school. I largely made out okay because, like many of my students, I grew up in a housing project; however, I got sidelined for two weeks after having been hit in the back by a rock a student threw at me just outside the school building. During my first year at the school, one of my colleagues, a male science teacher, suffered a "nervous breakdown" resulting from the constant tumult in his classroom. However, compared to men teachers, women teachers were more vulnerable to students' disrespectful behavior, which kept the number of women faculty low; about 10% of the teachers were women. While I was a teacher, I earned a master's degree in psychology by taking evening classes at the New School for Social Research (now the New School University). After six years, I left teaching to pursue a doctorate at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. My concentration was in developmental and educational psychology. Having an interest in mathematics, I took every statistics course available. I also learned computer programming (Fortran, PL-1). My dissertation concerned the development of children's cognitions about number and quantity. As part of my dissertation research, I tested hypotheses that compared predictions generated by Piaget's theory and Cattell and Horn's theory of fluid and crystallized abilities.

I underline one my failures. I had become a finalist for several academic positions around the US but failed to get a job. With my wedding approaching, I needed to earn a living. *Faute de mieux*, I took the position of Director of Research and Evaluation at a NYC school district. The position turned out to be the worst job I ever had; I had once been a tool-and-die operator at a hot, dusty factory and that miserable job was better. The formidable woman who ran the office of reimbursable programs, the office in which I worked, could never get fired because she was an excellent grant writer who brought a great deal of money to the district. But she was also a bully who publicly and ferociously berated people for small mistakes. She made a secretary cry over some minor typing errors. The district's reading coordinator broke down and cried inconsolably—she was trembling as she cried—just in anticipation of a tongue-lashing. The district's cheeky math coordinator discreetly nicknamed the head of the office "the samurai funder." When the head of the office started to berate me for my "personality," I told her to go fuck herself. I no longer cared if I got fired.

Then something amazing happened, which I owe to my wife. She got me to read the section of Sunday's *Times* called "Careers in Health" in addition to the

section I had been reading, “Careers in Education.” The result was that I got a job at New York State Psychiatric Institute/Dept. of Psychiatry, Columbia University on the strength of my background in psychology, statistics, and programming. The position was in the Division of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry. I worked with David Shaffer, a luminary in psychiatric research. We worked on an important longitudinal study on the relation of a neurological abnormality that was diagnosed at age 7 to mood and anxiety disorders ten years later. There was also a demographically matched group of abnormality-free children selected from the same birth cohort. David had figured out a way to conduct a longitudinal study for the cost of a cross-sectional study by piggybacking on an older study that stopped when the children were age 7. He wrote the intro and comment sections for a paper on the abnormality; I wrote the methods and results sections. It was he who introduced me to the field of epidemiology. David also got me to teach a biostatistics course for psychiatrists on research fellowships. I taught the course every fall semester from 1981 to 2010.

I won a post-doc to study epidemiology at Columbia. I participated in the Psychiatric Epidemiology Training Program, where I met Bruce Dohrenwend. Bruce conducted epidemiological research on adult psychiatric disorders and tackled the knotty problem of explaining the higher prevalence rates for schizophrenia and depression in the lowest socioeconomic strata. He developed a strategy to address whether those higher prevalence rates were largely the result of social selection or social causation processes (the social selection explanation turned out to be more compatible with the schizophrenia-related findings and the social causation explanation, with the depression-related findings). That experience got me to be on the lookout for selection-based explanations of what may look deceptively like causal processes in OHP research. Bruce was also involved in research on life stress. His research on life stress meshed with my experience of workplace stress as a teacher in a dangerous urban public school where I observed firsthand the toll the job took on my colleagues as well as the terrible job I had in the school district’s office of reimbursable programs.



I liked that both David and Bruce underlined the value of questioning everything. I have tried to do what I could to demolish a favored hypothesis and find out if the hypothesis withstands those tests, which is what I did in a study I published in 2001 on the impact of job stressors on the mental health and morale of teachers. The skepticism David and Bruce reinforced in me also led me to question received ideas about occupational burnout, a questioning that led to my collaboration with Renzo Bianchi (Norwegian University of Science and Technology) on burnout–depression overlap.

I got a tenure-track job at City College beginning in September 1985 and put in my retirement papers in June 2020. While at City College, I got appointments in other units of the University, the Educational Psychology and Psychology Programs at the CUNY Graduate Center and in the Dept. of Epidemiology and Biostatistics at the CUNY School of Public Health. I was a COVID retiree, having gotten sick in March 2020. I had three grandchildren at the time. I anticipated that eventually I would have a fourth. I wanted to be alive to see them grow up a little.

Although now a professor emeritus, I continue to conduct research and work with doctoral students. John Wiley will soon publish a book I wrote with Renzo entitled *Breaking Point: Job Stress, Occupational Depression, and the Myth of Burnout*.

Can you share one of the most interesting projects you have been a part of in your professional journey?

I underline two projects. One is a collaboration with Joe Mazzola (Meredith College) on qualitative research. We have both been concerned with how qualitative research can play a role in theory elaboration and hypothesis generation and its capacity to get us close to the experiences of people who are exposed to stressful conditions at work. That collaboration has also led to our writing a forthcoming chapter concerning ensuring that more OHP-related qualitative research gets published.

The second project is my collaboration with Renzo. We have been studying burnout–depression overlap in many different countries (e.g., US, France, Brazil, Spain, etc.). In addition, Renzo and I have gotten involved in relevant psychometric research. We co-developed a scale that we believe can replace burnout scales. That scale is the Occupational Depression Inventory. It has been used in more than 80 countries. We also codeveloped two other scales, a measure of job-related anxiety and a measure of pandemic-related anxiety.

What have you learned along the way that you wish someone had told you earlier in your career?

I made the biggest mistake of my career when I was a doctoral student—it probably impeded my chances of getting an academic position a little earlier in my career. I had planned and carried out a study on children's cognition about quantity. I wrote a paper based on the study and submitted the paper to the top journal in developmental psychology. The paper was rejected. Discouraged, I didn't rewrite the paper based on the reviewers' comments. I should have rewritten the paper and submitted it to another journal, even a less prestigious one. I blame only myself. I should have asked for advice. Advice-seeking is often a good idea.

What advice do you have for the next generation of OHP enthusiasts?

Publications are the coin of the realm in our field and in our sister fields. I address a problem everyone in our field, particularly newcomers, has faced, namely, having a submission rejected or receiving an R&R that is so freighted with criticisms that it may as well have been rejected. A couple of years after I earned a Ph.D., one of my best friends, Lenny Topp, was working on his dissertation. He needed a little help and I offered to help him. We discussed developmental theory and data analysis. I helped him with some editing. In that context I got to know a good-hearted CUNY developmental psychology professor, Marty Hoffman, who was on Lenny's dissertation committee. Marty was the editor who made the Merrill-Palmer Quarterly a respected developmental psychology journal. He told me something that stayed with me all

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these years. Marty told me that about half the papers he had ever published were originally rejected. He underscored that he was not talking about R&Rs. He was talking about outright rejections. He carefully read the reviews. He figured out which criticisms had some validity. He revised each rejected paper accordingly and eventually got it published.

The first version of the paper David Shaffer and I wrote on the relation of a neurological abnormality to later psychiatric disorder received substantial criticism from a reviewer at the *Archives of General Psychiatry* (now *JAMA Psychiatry*). This was a heavy-going R&R. Undeterred, David composed a carefully worded response that politely addressed the difficult reviewer. We made the necessary edits. The paper was accepted. The editor of a prominent social science journal rejected a paper Bruce Dohrenwend and colleagues wrote about social selection and social causation processes in psychiatric disorder. He and his colleagues later got the paper published in *Science*.

Based on my experience and the experience of people I have known, my advice is not to give up when a paper you write gets rejected. At the time I was attempting to publish my first research papers, I felt bad about getting a paper rejected or receiving an R&R with what seemed like it contained 100 criticisms and suggestions. It took a little time, but I developed the skin of an alligator when I got those reviews. I still feel bad after getting a rejection, but the feeling lasts a minute, then I move on. It can also be helpful to *privately* let off steam when you read what reviewers write. A few years ago, a journal rejected a submission Renzo and I wrote. Not an R&R. A straight rejection. We revised the paper and got it published in a more prestigious journal.

I encourage readers who are near the beginning of their careers to take seriously what the reviewers say. But don't beat yourself up over a rejection. Know that you are not alone. Figure out a way to make the paper acceptable to another journal. It is okay to seek out a less prestigious journal. Get advice from a colleague or mentor. If you get an R&R, make revisions in view of criticisms that are valid. But (politely) contest criticisms that you find wrong-headed. Carefully edit your response to the reviewers. Let a colleague review your response. Don't let your anger spill into your response to reviewers, lest you antagonize them, squandering your opportunity to publish the revised paper in the journal you selected.