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## Whence Applied Science in a Person-Centric Work Psychology?

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Weiss and Rupp (2011) argue that because of its prevailing paradigm, industrial–organizational (I–O) psychology can be viewed as having run out of interesting questions to answer and that many of the questions that are being studied are trivial and uninteresting. Although this contention itself may cause quite a bit of debate, the fact that it can be argued should act as a wake-up call to both academics and practitioners. What cannot be argued is the importance of the work that we do. As Weiss and Rupp state, “because of the importance of work to humans you cannot understand humans without understanding work.”

In counterpoint to Weiss and Rupp, however, I disagree with their implicit assumption that the current philosophy of science and methodological approaches in I–O psychology are unable to deal with workers as individuals. Weiss and Rupp suggest we consider a rejection of both the premise that people are objects within an organizational system and that the justification for research is application of knowledge with a collective purpose. Without application, however, we are missing out on the fundamental goals and process of psychology as a science, specifically, the understanding of current behavior and the prediction of future behavior. You can only go so

far in developing a science of behavior at work without considering the holistic nature of individual–organization interaction. As Mannoia (1980) contends “the answers one obtains are shaped by the questions one asks.” Without a complete context and consideration for the ultimate use of knowledge, science loses its focus and purpose.

A person-centric examination of work has the potential to contribute to our knowledge and practice in I–O psychology, but it must be understood within the context of the workplace and its core relationships. As has been discussed numerous times in the literature (see Argyris, 1964), this relationship can be understood from two distinct viewpoints: that of the employee (i.e., the individual) and that of the employer (i.e., the organization).

To expand on Weiss and Rupp’s analogy of the box and the person, it is possible to look at the properties of a box (Weiss and Rupp’s between-entities assumption) while also considering its contents (the person-centric view). However, it is not possible to fully understand the box without taking into account the properties and contents of the truck that is transporting the box (i.e., the organizational context of the employee–employer interaction). My contention is that research may seem uninteresting or trivial not because of a lack of focus on the individual but more because there is a lack of focus on the person, as an individual, within the context of the organization. This is not simply a semantic difference. It is this context and consideration of differing,

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and sometimes opposing, viewpoints that are necessary in order to understand work and therefore the person.

Measurement exists for two purposes: (1) to replace the ambiguity of words and general concepts and (2) to allow standardization and consistency across research (Weathington, Cunningham, & Pittenger, 2010). Ultimately it can then be argued that placing a value on an attribute of a person is essential in representing the complex ambiguity of life in an understandable and usable framework. Proper operationalization is dependent on the ultimate use of the data being collected. Some of this will be person-centric, some of it will focus on collective purpose, and some of it will focus on other areas entirely.

A holistic perspective with the consideration of the person-centric perspective in its proper context will result in the compilation of a nomological network of

usable knowledge. Measurement or even the treatment of a person as an object in the context of work need not represent a rejection of the person as an individual. Ultimately, a consideration of behavioral prediction and the application of knowledge can guide the selection of appropriate topics and techniques for both research and practice.

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