
Agreement, Disagreement, and a Person-Centered Psychology of Working

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The purpose of this commentary is to describe how the prevailing paradigm described by Weiss and Rupp (2011) has influenced the current conceptualization of agreement in the organizational sciences. Then, I outline what a person-centered view of agreement might look like. Finally, I describe specific questions that researchers might ask when considering agreement from a person-centered perspective and how these questions could be addressed methodologically. At the outset, I want to emphasize that there are probably other ways the prevailing paradigm has influenced the development of the agreement concept in industrial–organizational (I–O) psychology and also there are certainly other ways to develop and construe a person-centered view of agreement. The primary purpose of this commentary is to catalyze interest in and start a dialogue about the topic of agreement as it currently stands in the field and how it might be different from a person-centered perspective.

Agreement in the Prevailing Paradigm

The concept of “agreement” is ubiquitous in several areas of I–O psychology. For example, when teams–researchers talk about shared mental models, they are interested in the extent to which team members “agree” on the team’s tasks, teamwork, functions, goals, and interrelationships (Mathieu, Heffner, Goodwin, Salas, & Cannon-Bowers, 2000). Similarly, organizational climate researchers describe a climate as strong when there is considerable “agreement” and weak when there is not (Schneider, Salvaggio, & Subirats, 2002). Typically, agreement is operationally defined as the extent to which mean scale scores from a survey among a group of respondents are similar as determined by a statistical tool such as an interrater agreement index, intraclass correlations, or standard deviation.

However, just because people have similar mean scores on a scale does not mean that they necessarily agree with each other. If we asked 10 members of a workgroup (i.e., spoke with them as though they are real people with personal, idiosyncratic observations about the world) whether they actually agree with one another, there’s a good chance that they would say that they do not, not all of them, not on all of the relevant issues. I suspect that we might be surprised by what they have to say about their agreements and

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disagreements with others in the group, considering the consistency of their mean scores on those scales that we as a field call “agreement.”

The focus on the consistency of mean scale scores across people as an indication of agreement is derived directly from the prevailing paradigm, as described by Weiss and Rupp. The *between-entities assumption* is reflected in first principles of the current conceptualization of agreement: People are treated as objects with assigned properties that are somehow related to the assigned properties of others. The current conceptualization of agreement objectifies the individuals in the group and the group as a whole. It attempts to describe the relationships among the group members’ properties not relationships among the group members themselves. Better terms for the current conceptualization of agreement might be similarity, correspondence, congruity, or (in converse) diversity of survey responses. Even more descriptive would be to include the adjective “statistical” in front of any of these terms.

The second feature of the prevailing paradigm described by Weiss and Rupp has a more subtle yet far-reaching effect on the current notion of agreement. The *collective purpose agenda* encourages our field to focus on offering answers to organizational questions based on experiences, beliefs, categorizations, or perceptions that are widespread among workers rather than preserving the diversity of individual perspectives. Consider, for example, the development of a new scale. We find common themes in interviews and focus groups about the construct in question. We write items to address what most people think of constituting safety climate or service climate or teamwork or managerial support. We focus on those areas that many people see as relevant to the construct and the organizational problem while ignoring the areas that only some (or one) individuals see as part of the construct. Because we have represented most of the people in many of the ways that they have described

their experiences, we believe that we have captured the essence of the construct.

Simultaneously, we relegate divergences to the scrapheap of error instead of asking ourselves if there is an important reason why there are differences across people and—notably for a person-centered approach to a psychology of working—whether these differences are experienced by people as important parts of their interactions with the other people they work with. We do not know how central these unique components are to individuals’ perceptions of the construct or how much they influence people’s phenomenological experiences. Nor do we know how much these divergences matter in the quotidian interactions among people sharing a workspace. These divergences might be the definitive components of the workers’ perspectives rather than the commonalities that our scales typically capture. It is this uniqueness of individual experience and how these perceptions can cause disagreements among people that are missing from the current conceptualization of agreement.

A Person-Centered Concept of Agreement

Weiss and Rupp describe three characteristics of a person-centric psychology of working, each of which is essential to developing a person-centered notion of agreement. In the person-centric view, a sense of agreement occurs when someone feels like their opinions, thoughts, beliefs, or the like and (an)others’ are the same. By its very nature, a sense of agreement is a subjective experience that must be examined from a *subjective stance*. Importantly, how an agreement is reached is essential to the experience of agreement. Outsiders cannot declare that a dyad agrees because even if the words the dyad members use are the same the experienced meaning behind those words might not be. For example, capitulating on where you will spend Thanksgiving (your parents’ home vs. your partner’s parents’ home) does not *feel* like agreeing, even though you and your partner have reached

an accord. Agreement is, as Weiss and Rupp describe, a *lived-through experience*.

Notably, the *active self* makes the determination of agreement or disagreement. People recognize that agreement or disagreement is happening to them, with others, at a particular time and place. They know that they themselves have a role in whether agreement or disagreement is occurring. When experiencing agreement or disagreement, people do not think that the result will be a change in satisfaction level; the experience itself is satisfying or dissatisfying as it occurs. (It is also not necessarily the case that agreement is satisfying and disagreement is dissatisfying; imagine discovering that you agree with your arch-nemesis.) It is not merely the end result of reaching an agreement or failing to do so that matters to people; the process of having disagreements that resolve—or not—also matters.

It is important to recognize that from the person-centric perspective, agreement can be experienced in numerous ways. Agreement can be perceptual only; for example, Dwight might believe that he would be an excellent assistant regional manager and also perceive that Michael thinks Dwight would be an excellent assistant regional manager—whether or not Michael actually does. Such occurrences might best be called a “sense of agreement” because the person perceives agreement, whether or not it actually occurs. Agreement might also occur through explicit knowledge of another person’s beliefs. For example, every member of the office might each declare that Kelly is annoying or Ryan is a jerk. The result: Each member of the office knows that they are all in agreement. Agreement might arise from two (or more) people discussing an issue, weighing the pros and cons of various options, bringing up suggestions that the other might not have considered or even be aware of, narrowing down the options, and settling on the same single choice. Notably, agreement might never be achieved, despite attempts to reach an agreement. Disagreements could abound, leading to a fundamental impasse

that cannot be rectified through additional discussion or concessions.

Throughout these descriptions, I have used terms including *agreement* (i.e., sameness of thoughts, feelings, beliefs, etc.), *sense of agreement* (i.e., an individual’s perception that others have the same thoughts), and the process of *reaching an agreement* (i.e., people coming to have or recognizing others as having the same thought). Recognition of these separate yet related components of a person-centric agreement paradigm is essential because the person-centric view of agreement does not deal with fixed objective characteristics of people but the messy, nonrecursive, mutually influential interactions among people and how these interactions make a person feel. Undoubtedly, if a person-centered view of agreement is to achieve any status in the research literature, a more precise vocabulary must be developed. Some of this vocabulary could be borrowed from the literatures on negotiation and psychological contracts, but other terms will have to be created as the person-centered view of agreement and the person-centered psychology of working more generally mature. Although the person-centered view of agreement is still in its infancy, it is clear that this view of agreement differs from the current conceptualization of agreement that relies on statistical operationalizations comparing individuals’ characteristics and is an important topic of study for both theoretical and practical reasons.

How Do We Begin to Assess Person-Centric Agreement?

All of this raises the question, how do we go about embarking on a research program on agreement from a person-centered perspective? Foremost, we have to look beyond the sameness of beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors and instead make the object of study the subjective experiences of people as they agree and disagree with others. We would have to reconceptualize the notion of disagreement, allowing for the possibility that people do not always see eye-to-eye on

what constitutes a domain of interest. This goes beyond expecting that people can reasonably differ as to whether they should mark a manager as *effective* or *very effective* on a survey item to the expectation that people can reasonably disagree for important and substantive reasons on the specific behaviors that constitute managerial effectiveness. We would even have to accept that what one person believes is effective another person might find it ineffective, or even that two people might believe that one manager is ineffective for different, even completely opposite, reasons. (For anecdotal evidence of this, consider any major U.S. government reform—e.g., health care—and the polarized critiques from members of opposing political parties.) We would have to accept that the subjectivity of what makes up a coherent domain of workplace experiences is phenomenologically determined and important to people as they experience it. We would have to accept that these differences in domains across people lead to tension, dislike, growth, confusion, understanding, change, and a whole host of other messy emotions and experiences.

Certainly research on agreement and disagreement from a person-centered perspective would be a time-consuming endeavor. Adopting a person-centered notion of agreement requires that the relationships among people be examined. We would need to begin with qualitative methods and then move to an expansive quantitative method such as social network analysis so that people could indicate the extent to which they have a sense of agreement with other individuals. Undoubtedly, whatever methods we apply would need to have a longitudinal component; agreeing is not a fixed state but a fluctuating one, just as people's opinions, thoughts, attitudes, needs, beliefs, abilities, and behaviors are not fixed.

Some basic questions about the experience of agreement need to be addressed, such as: How do people know that others agree with them, explicitly and implicitly? To what extent do people have

false senses of agreement? What roles do trust, personal relationship history, and similar characteristics (e.g., demographics, appearance, and espoused values) play in achieving an agreement or in a sense of agreement? What makes disagreement so hurtful to some people and relatively unimportant to others? Further questions could address the individual and interpersonal processes of resolving disagreements. For example, what cognitive processes are involved in resolving disagreements? What emotions are associated with agreeing, disagreeing, or publicly capitulating to another's viewpoint even when one privately feels otherwise? Even more complicated questions could deal with how disagreements in one domain of work (or life) spill over to other domains. For example, what is the effect of prior disagreement on trust between people when a new issue arises? Do people, dyads, or groups become entrenched in particular ways of addressing disagreement and are those tactics effective across different domains? These are only some of the research questions that inquiry into person-centered agreement might pursue.

It is clear that there is another way to consider the concept of agreement in I–O psychology, drawing on a person-centered psychology of working. Studying agreement in this paradigm is likely to be time-consuming, but all research is time-consuming. The richness of what we might learn about how people experience their daily lives with their coworkers, supervisors, and work might be worth the time and effort this takes. Above, I laid out a few questions that could be addressed, but there are scores more that would be interesting and fruitful lines of research about work and working, organizations and organizational life. I do not know what we will find, but I do know that, on average, people can tell us whether they agree or disagree with other people and how those agreements and disagreements influence their relationships, their emotions, their abilities to concentrate, their well-being, their satisfaction, their desires to stay or go, and a variety of other experiences in

which we as a field are vitally interested. It seems to me that we should be asking them.

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