

COMMENTARIES

The Human Experience of Working: Richer Science, Richer Practice

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Weiss and Rupp (2011) have written a stimulating and provocative essay calling for a person-centric work psychology. I would first like to react to the contrast they make between the prevailing paradigm of industrial–organizational (I–O) research and the person-centered alternative they offer. Secondly, I would like to offer some thoughts on the value of their contribution by extending aspects of a person-centric work psychology to just two illustrative areas of interest to I–O researchers and practitioners.

The Prevailing Paradigm

Weiss and Rupp see the prevailing paradigm as having two distinguishing features. One is an approach to research that emphasizes assigning properties to people and measuring the association between properties. The second is an emphasis on collective purposes in studying individual behavior in organizations. I would like to balance what might be an understatement of the first of these features and an overstatement of the second.

In Weiss and Rupp's view, the prevailing paradigm studies "*people as objects with stable properties, differing from each other*" (italics in original). I would go further and say that the focus of interest in the prevailing

paradigm is on the properties themselves and their associations with other properties and with external criteria of interest, and not on *people at all*. Let me just take one basic example that transcends any specific area of research and that I hope adds to an appreciation of a more person-centric approach even for most of us who operate within the prevailing paradigm.

Recent issues of the I–O journals include research on properties such as demographic factors (age, race, and tenure), personality traits (the Big Five and locus of control), facets of organizational commitment and identification, and justice perceptions. Although this approach is useful in predicting measurable outcomes like performance (including organizational citizenship behavior), retention, and accidents, note that the prevailing paradigm treats people as nothing more than sources of data. Few within I–O, on even the most basic level of research methodology, try to understand the respondent as an active sense maker, involved in a thoughtful if often virtual interaction—or as Gessner and Klimoski (2006) term it, a conversation—with the researcher. I would therefore extend Weiss and Rupp's call and suggest that we need to take the research respondent more seriously as a person working to make sense of the experience of "providing data." That person is actively drawing on cues (e.g., the stated purpose of the data collection, the order of items, how they are phrased, the medium of administration,

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the presence or absence of a proctor) to make sense of the researcher's intentions and to decide whether to comply with or subvert those intentions (Schwarz, 1999). Her construal of the situation, the meanings she attaches to the research situation and the questions asked, the narrative she tells her associates about the experience afterward or that she heard from her associates beforehand, the emotions she feels while completing the research instruments are all basic to truly understanding the properties data that she provides us.

On the other hand, I would like to soften a bit the contrast that is made between the collective purpose agenda of the prevailing paradigm and the person-centered agenda of the proposed paradigm. People are social and through our evolutionary past have always been so. Although organizational researchers have indeed focused on such collective purposes as group or organizational productivity, let's not forget that so have individual workers. A person-centered approach, then, needs to include the person's construal of the social context and teleology within which he operates at work. What constitutes feelings of belongingness? In what ways is the emotional tone of team success, the feelings of accomplishment, and the impact on self-identity and integration different from that associated with individual success? The integration of both perspectives comes, I think, when we examine the individual's incorporation of collective purpose into his experiences and narratives.

Enriching Research and Practice

Weiss and Rupp have presented a way of thinking about work psychology and a broad research agenda. It is worth noting, though, that the essay also provides a primer on methods and approaches that have been used productively in other fields of psychology but only rarely in I–O to capture the experience of work. I would like to expand on their argument by providing two additional examples from areas of interest to both academics and practitioners.

Preemployment Assessment

There has been renewed interest in the applicant's reactions to the preemployment assessment process. Much of this important work has adopted the pioneering approach of Gilliland (1993) and uses a justice theory perspective (see, e.g., Bauer, Truxillo, Mack, & Costa, 2011). What if we approached the applicant's behavior in the assessment situation from the broader person-centric perspective advocated by Weiss and Rupp? I believe we could generate an interesting set of questions, the answers to which would contribute to both science and practice. For example,

- What does the experience of taking this assessment feel like to the applicant? How do testing conditions, the medium of administration, the desperation of the applicant to land a job affect that experience?
- At what is the applicant's attention directed while she is completing the test? We assume it is on the test, but is that true throughout the testing process? What is the applicant really thinking about moment to moment while taking the test—is she ruminating on some memory unrelated to the assessment? Is she daydreaming? Does some item or a particular interview question trigger test-focused attention or rumination?
- Can tests be fun? Does having a fun experience while taking a preemployment test add to the applicant's perception of the hiring organization or lower test anxiety? What does bored or engaged feel like to the applicant? Does the time spent taking the test feel like it is passing slowly or quickly?
- In explaining the assessment experience to others—including other potential applicants, family, or the recruiter—how does the applicant construct her personal narrative? How does that narrative reflect the personal identity the candidate is trying to build (e.g., as tech-savvy or conscientious)?

Answers to these and many other questions would be a contribution to building a psychology of work. They can help us understand people at a particular, defined, and structured moment in time that may end up being critical to how their lives unfold from that point onward. Answers to these person-centered questions can also help us as practitioners expand our notions of usability testing, create stronger alignment of assessment processes and organizational branding in the labor market, and engender more realistic newcomer expectations about the organization's culture as construed through the applicant's assessment experiences.

One more comment about extending a person-centered approach to the arena of preemployment assessment. We have long known about the effect of realistic job previews (RJPs) on reducing early turnover, although the mediating mechanisms are still unclear (Premack & Wanous, 1985). Today, many organizations use rich multimedia presentations to provide a realistic sense of what working in the target job would be like. Incumbents talk about the positives as well as the negatives; the video typically shows the work site(s); the sounds and smells, the sources of satisfaction and of stress are described. The best RJPs present a taste of the employment experience as a basis for the applicant making a judgment early on about his likely fit. On the other hand, when the organization is evaluating the candidate, the focus is on measuring a few critical properties to distill a simplified composite evaluation on which to make a selection decision. What would happen if our preemployment assessment procedures were constructed to capture a realistic worker preview (RWP)? For sure, it would mean a far stronger reliance on customized simulation exercises. It might include asking the candidate to submit or create a portfolio that conveys a fuller picture of how the candidate might behave and perform as an employee. It might try to leverage information that reflects the candidate's behavior in his or her natural habitat, as drawn, for example, from

social media that the candidate uses and the view of himself the candidate projects in those media (Reis & Gosling, 2010). Technology exists to quickly and easily collect observations of the employee's characteristic working style over the Internet from former associates. Leaving aside for now validity and legal issues, the basic notion is to give the organization, including the prospective hiring manager—and in some instances prospective clients, subordinates, and peers—a more holistic feel for what the experience of working with the applicant on a daily and extended basis might be.

Newcomer Adjustment

Bauer, Bodner, Erdogan, Truxillo, and Tucker (2007) provide an insightful meta-analysis of the antecedents and outcomes of the organizational newcomer assimilation process. They have identified a few critical factors that predict the likelihood of successful newcomer onboarding. The "prevailing paradigm" research on newcomers would, I believe, be considerably enriched by applying the methods of personal narrative to better understand the newcomer experience from the employee's perspective. Looking at the "person as author," researchers in other fields have uncovered elements of the story grammar used by people to create the components of their personal narratives. (McAdams & Olson, 2010). This grammar includes the author as the protagonist who moves in a goal-directed fashion, confronting and reacting to one or more obstacles, with the plot moving forward to some happy or unhappy conclusion. Capturing such narratives from newcomers can help us address a range of psychologically interesting and practically valuable questions that draw on the person-centered approach advocated by Weiss and Rupp:

- How are these early experiences "chunked"? What are the "chapter" titles, what events are included in each chapter, and what time period is covered by the chapter? At what

point, if ever, does the newcomer feel she has arrived?

- Who in the social environment are the heroes and villains of the onboarding experience? What attributions are made about these key players?
- Is there a periodicity to the emotional highs and lows of the onboarding experience? Here the personal narrative might be tracked against other methodologies such as real-time diary entries or smart phone-delivered measures of mood.
- From the newcomer's perspective and in her own voice, what were in retrospect the key learnings and from whom and through what channels were they learned?
- How does the onboarding narrative fit into the lifelong autobiography the newcomer constructs?

Answers to these and similar questions can guide the design of interventions aimed at increasing the successful assimilation of newcomers (Adler & Stomski, 2010).

Two-Way Street

The adoption by I–O psychologists of a person-centered paradigm will enrich science and practice in our field. It will also, I expect, contribute materially to the development of theory and research in other fields of psychology. For instance, the literature on autobiographical memory (McAdams & Olson, 2010) has very little content about work lives, although most of us spend over half of our waking hours through almost all of our adult lives working. How does the person's work story fit into her life story? Similarly person-centered research within the workplace has a great deal to contribute to the study of behavior in natural habitats, what Barker (1968) years ago termed ecological psychology. With the

technology in place at most modern call centers, for example, and the close interface between the worker and that technology, I–O researchers could contribute materially to the study of attentional, intentional, and affective components of consciousness, in real time and real field settings. The path between a person-centered psychology and a person-centered I–O psychology is a two-way street.

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