

A Humanistic Viewpoint on Use-Inspired Motivation Research

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In his path-breaking book, Stokes (1997) rejected the classic distinction between research that is “basic” and “applied” and instead suggested that research can be undertaken both for basic understanding and for use in practice. Kanfer (2009) uses this approach to identify future directions for use-inspired research on work motivation. In doing so, she focuses almost exclusively on research that is useful for managers and that has performance as its criterion. In the present commentary, I highlight that motivation research can also be useful for workers and have well-being as its criterion. Specifically, I pose and address two questions regarding use-inspired research on work motivation: “Useful for whom?” and “Motivation for what?” Next, I highlight a direct implication of these questions for the field of work motivation and in particular for the advancement of use-inspired motivation research. In conclusion, I advocate a humanistic viewpoint on use-inspired research that operates as part of a scientist–practitioner–humanist model of industrial–organizational (I–O) psychology (Lefkowitz, 2008).

Useful for Whom?

In my view, Kanfer’s conceptualization of use-inspired research is limited in that it places a disproportionate emphasis on tradi-

tional corporatist values (Lefkowitz, 2008). In other words, the interests of individuals and the common good (“society”) are relatively absent. For example, intrinsic motivation and task enjoyment are treated primarily as mechanisms by which a given intervention may sustain or enhance performance, as opposed to valued ends in and of themselves. Similarly, discussion of strategies to “motivate” people refers mostly to ways of improving job performance, as opposed to meeting psychological needs. Thus, when Kanfer refers to use-inspired, “practical” research on work motivation, she primarily does so in terms that speak to the perspective of managers and organizations. Accordingly, it is important to be explicit in saying that use-inspired research may not only be useful for managers and organizations but also for workers in general.

Motivation for What?

For Kanfer, the “practice” of work motivation is an aspect of the job in which managers are responsible for arranging the task and the socioemotional and physical conditions of their subordinates in a way that encourages employees to allocate sufficient personal resources for the accomplishment of organizationally valued performance objectives. As mentioned, this form of use-inspired research takes the perspective of managers and organizations. In contrast, work motivation research that is useful for workers may concern itself with creating and sustaining conditions that promote the fulfillment of higher level goals such as agency, affiliation, and esteem

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(e.g., DeShon & Gillespie, 2005). Thus, whereas management-focused research may tend to study motivation for performance, worker-focused research may study motivation for well-being. Ideally, these differing research agendas and criteria are not always conflicting but rather complementary.

Implications for Use-Inspired Motivation Research

The study of work motivation concerns the psychological mechanisms and processes that connect the person with the environment (Kanfer, Chen, & Pritchard, 2008a). In this way, motivation is measured by what people attend to in a given environment, how much they act on it, and for how long (Ployhart, 2008). Accordingly, the criteria for motivation are multivariate and dynamic, and they need to be studied as such (Dalal & Hulin, 2008). Thus, the heuristic model of work motivation proposed by Kanfer et al. (2008a, 2008b) includes the multilevel psychological mechanisms and processes that connect people and environments as they change over time, as well as their dynamic and reciprocal effects on work behaviors. Moreover, Kanfer implies that use-inspired research may identify motivational patterns that are “effective” in terms of their effects on organizationally valued performance objectives.

However, by highlighting that motivation research can also be useful for workers and have well-being as its criterion, I aim to broaden the meaning of effectiveness. In particular, “effective” motivational patterns are not only associated with improved productivity or output but also with enhanced capabilities to work in the future as well as with personal growth and well-being (DeShon & Gillespie, 2005; Hackman, 1990). As an example, a motivational pattern that thwarts the ability to function in the future or that greatly frustrates a psychological need is not necessarily effective, even if it leads to a successful performance episode. In this way, I argue that use-inspired motivation research ought to include the study of motivational patterns that are sustainable in

terms of worker well-being, such that they do not deplete the capacity or desire to invest resources in the future. Moreover, I argue that use-inspired motivation research may include the study of motivational patterns that enhance well-being in that they create resources that can be applied in the future.

Conclusions

Lefkowitz (2008) argues that we as I–O psychologists should modify our self-image by expanding our espoused values to encompass a scientist–practitioner–humanist model. I agree and suggest that the inclusion of a humanistic viewpoint necessarily expands Kanfer’s use-inspired research agendas on work motivation, both in terms of “for whom” and “for what.” That is, use-inspired research on work motivation may be useful for the worker, and it may include well-being as a criterion. This is not to minimize the importance of research that is useful for managers and organizations and that has performance as its criterion. Indeed, as a discipline, I believe I–O psychology should include many and varied use-inspired research agendas. In particular, the field of work motivation can be both worker- and management-focused by having as its criteria both well-being and job performance. In this way, we can better serve the goal of psychology “to improve the condition of individuals, organizations, *and* society” (American Psychological Association, 2002, p. 1062, emphasis added).

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