
Workers as Whole People With Their Own Objectives

JENNIFER M. GEORGE AND ERIK DANE
Rice University

Whether or not the industrial–organizational (I–O) psychology literature has been as remiss as Weiss and Rupp (2011) suggest in neglecting the topic of “experiencing work” is potentially debatable (e.g., see George & Jones, 1996, 1997). Nonetheless, a person-centric work psychology would clearly enlighten our understanding of the experience of work. In this regard, there are two related issues that we urge researchers to consider in pursuing a person-centric approach: workers as whole people and the outcomes or objectives of work.

By definition, I–O psychology is concerned with matters pertaining to the workplace. However, work experiences and episodes cannot be considered in isolation from workers’ lives as whole people. Needs, cares, wants, values, problems, tragedies, triumphs, grief, and joy experienced in one’s life color the nature of one’s work experience. Performing the same kind of work tasks against the backdrop of different life experiences and challenges likely results in distinct kinds of experiences of working. As much as managers might hope that workers can check the rest of their lives at the workplace door, this is not an option for living and breathing human beings.

Although somewhat clichéd, a devastating and intractable argument with one’s

partner is likely to have considerable effects on how work is subsequently experienced, as is the blossoming of new romantic love. A single working parent likely experiences high work loads and long working hours differently than a working parent with a stay-at-home spouse. As suggested by these examples and countless other cases, peoples’ experiences outside work shape how they experience life at work (Rothbard, 2001). A person-centric approach necessarily should consider workers’ lives in their entirety and the ways in which work is integrated with and segmented from the rest of workers’ lives. Consistent with this reasoning, research has explored the implications of the economic instrumentality of work in people’s lives (e.g., Brief & Atieh, 1987; George & Brief, 1990); relationships among family, work, stress, and well-being (e.g., Edwards & Rothbard, 1999); how support from work and nonwork sources contributes to creativity at work (Madjar, Oldham, & Pratt, 2002); and the implications of individual preferences for work–home segmentation or integration (e.g., Kreiner, 2006).

On a related point, Weiss and Rupp discuss what they refer to as the “collective purpose agenda.” Much of I–O psychology tends to assume implicitly or explicitly that workers’ interests and managers’ interests are aligned so that even if workers do not take part in forming the collective purpose of an organization that employs them, it is assumed that what is good for the organization is good for them. In an era in which top managers earn hundreds of times what rank

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Jennifer M. George.
E-mail: jgeorge@rice.edu

Address: Jesse H. Jones Graduate School of Business and Department of Psychology, Rice University, 6100 Main Street, Houston, TX 77005

and file workers do, workers are treated as expendable to cut costs and boost short-term profits, and layoffs take place despite high levels of productivity (Rampell, 2010), what is good for managers and organizations is often not good for workers. This is not merely an academic or “conceptual” debate. Rather, for those workers suffering from persistent unemployment, for those workers who have lost their homes and their retirements, for those workers who lack health insurance and cannot afford doctor visits and medications for either themselves or their families, this is a debate about the inhumanity of American corporate capitalism (Kasser, Cohn, Kanner, & Ryan, 2007).

Thus, the “collective purpose agenda” is a political debate. Owners, shareholders, and top managers are powerful, and I–O psychology takes its cue from them as to what the collective purpose of an organization is or should be. Relatively powerless rank and file workers have little input into this process. If they did, perhaps providing adequate wages, health care, job security, and long-term stability for all organizational members would rise to the forefront of the collective purpose. In addition, boosting short-term profits by means that ignore the interests of rank and file workers (e.g., by mass layoffs) and rewarding executives handsomely for doing so would be seen as antithetical to the collective purpose as would huge disparities between the incomes of those at the top of an organization and those at lower levels.

A person-centric work psychology must acknowledge, nonetheless, that work is a purposive activity—it is performed to accomplish something. Thus, in focusing on the phenomenology of work experience, researchers also need to consider, from the worker’s perspective, the nature of the objective (or desired end state) that motivates one to work. Importantly, the experience of work is likely to vary, perhaps significantly, across workers depending on the intended objectives or end states workers envision for themselves.

In taking stock of the reasons that people work, we believe researchers may be

disproportionately interested in some work objectives or end states compared to others. As a group, I–O psychologists are relatively privileged in society. Perhaps we focus too much on issues that might be of concern to us (e.g., intrinsically meaningful work) to the neglect of objectives concerning economic instrumentality that are of primary concern for a large number of workers, both domestic and worldwide, who do not have the luxury of thinking beyond the objective of making ends meet.

It is a sobering truth that many people view work primarily as a vehicle to ensure their survival and that of their loved ones—and a highly uncertain vehicle at that. Consider the millions of people worldwide who may consider themselves fortunate to have menial labor jobs and who are fearful of losing them—people who find it difficult to maintain even a subsistence-level lifestyle. Consider what work might *feel like* to these individuals. Through such reflection, we may better recognize that work not only means different things to different people, it is also experienced quite differently owing to the specific objectives for which it is performed. Although thought experiments of this nature form the basis for much discussion in philosophy (Brendel, 2004), I–O psychologists have been hesitant to engage in similar speculations about what it is like to experience the world through the eyes of people seeking to fulfill very basic survival needs through their work. A person-centric work psychology may call for more empathetic identification along these lines and may help researchers to develop novel hypotheses in this regard. Methodologically, research in this vein could follow traditional qualitative and quantitative methodologies. Moreover, as Weiss and Rupp suggest, the development of new methodologies might also be beneficial as would be conducting research in unconventional contexts (Bamberger & Pratt, 2010).

At the same time, in taking note of individuals’ objectives for working, researchers should be wary of targeting large groups of people engaged in largely similar,

rudimentary job tasks (e.g., day laborers) and assuming that, just because these people may be performing this work solely for its monetary benefits, the experience of work is the same for each of these workers. To do so would risk violating our first point: that a person-centric work psychology merits an appreciation for each person as a unique whole, whose experience of work is shaped not only by why one is working but also by other, deeply personal events and relationships beyond work.

In all, we believe that, as a field, we tend to be myopic in our assumptions about who workers are and why they work. In particular, we not only limit our focus to people as they are *at work*, we also tend to study behavior among workers who are perhaps more stereotypical (i.e., relatively wealthy and educated members of industrialized, Western societies) than statistically typical (Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010). As such, we often forget that for many people work is dearly precious and is performed because it provides a means to basic needs fulfillment. Such blind spots within our field should not be permitted to cloud the basic truth that the “workplace” takes many forms and does not preclude the economically disadvantaged from its reach.

To better understand how work is experienced, we need to acknowledge that workers are whole people with needs, desires, wants, and goals that play out in and transcend the workplace. Moreover, we must keep in mind that work is a purposive activity and attempt to understand what end states or objectives workers seek to attain through their work. In doing so, we stand to gain more insight into what it means to experience work and, in the process, to reexamine assumptions that may have hindered the development of research on this important topic.

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