FOCAL ARTICLE

Experiencing Work: An Essay on a Person-Centric Work Psychology

HOWARD M. WEISS
Purdue University

DEBORAH E. RUPP
University of Illinois

Abstract
In this essay we argue for a more person-centric direction for research in industrial–organizational (I–O) psychology. We argue that the prevailing paradigm within I–O treats workers as objects and in so doing limits the ability to develop a deep and continued understanding of the important ways in which humans relate to work. In response, we think there is a need for a more coherent focus on the worker and on the subjective experience of working. After describing the current paradigm we suggest an alternative—a person-centric work psychology that takes the worker as its focus and worker experience as a topic of study.

What would a thoroughly person-centric examination of work be like? What would an examination be like that took as its starting point the rejection of the treatment of people as objects in organizational systems in favor of a full and focused appreciation of the individual at work, his or her thoughts and feelings and behaviors? What would be the result of the rejection of a justification for research based on application and collective purpose and the substitution of a justification based entirely on understanding human work experience?

Our essay addresses these questions and in doing so advocates for a work psychology that focuses on the lived-through experience of working—for a work psychology that is person-centric and squarely focused on the worker. No model is being presented. No theory, no constructs, no testable propositions are described. Instead, we are presenting a way of thinking followed by a research agenda inspired by that way of thinking. The essay is essentially an argument for a psychology of working studied from the worker’s point of view.

Miguel de Unamuno (1912/1954), Spanish philosopher, wrote these words in the early part of the 20th century. This quote comes from his book Tragic Sense of Life and specifically from the chapter titled “The Man of Flesh and Bone.”

The man of flesh and bone—the man who is born, suffers, and dies—above all who dies. The man who eats and drinks and plays and sleeps and thinks and wills. The man who is seen and heard. But there is another thing that is also called a man, and he is the subject of not a few lucubrations, more or less scientific. He is the legendary featherless...
biped, the political animal of Aristotle, the social contractor of Rousseau, the homo economicus of the Manchester Group, ... A man neither of here nor there, neither of this age nor of another, who has neither sex nor country, who is, in brief, merely an idea. (Italics added)

Unamuno contrasts the man who eats, sleeps, is born, dies, “The man of flesh and bone,” with the abstract man of scientific study—the man who is “merely an idea.” We begin with Unamuno’s observation because we believe that it helps describe both the current paradigm of industrial–organizational (I–O) psychology and a core deficiency of that paradigm. In our opinion, the working “man,” as currently studied, is reduced to a list of abstractions (skills, attitudes, features, properties) identified and organized to facilitate the collective purposes of organizations. Lost is the man (and woman of course) who thinks, feels, laughs, eats, and so forth. Lost is The Man of Flesh and Bone.

This, in our judgment, is quite a significant loss. We believe the search for useful abstractions turns attention away from the people themselves. It turns attention away from the integrity of the person at work, from the experience of working, from the meaning of work, from work seen through the eyes of the worker. It looks at the worker with the goal of identifying and measuring his or her properties instead of trying to understand how the worker looks at and experiences work. It constrains the research that is conducted and stimulates research that is disconnected from what really matters to people.

Work is endlessly fascinating to people because it is a core part of the human condition. People live lives at work. They are anxious, depressed, focused, and energetic. They have a broader sense of well-being and derive meaning and identity from work. They can experience despair and sorrow over lost work. Work is an essential element of what it means to be human in the same way that loving is or playing is. Because of the importance of work to humans you cannot understand humans without understanding work.

Yet, we believe that the predominant paradigm of I–O psychology does not do justice to these truisms because it directs our attention away from the important human questions about work. Every paradigm suggests its own set of puzzles, and the choice of problems to be examined is constrained by the overall paradigm. There are questions one might ask within one approach that wouldn’t even be seen as questions in another. Right now, for many people, I–O often feels like it is out of interesting questions. Many are haunted by a sense that much of what is studied seems trivial and uninteresting. We think this is a result of the inherent limitations of the prevailing paradigm, a paradigm that encourages I–O psychologists to look at people as objects.

As a consequence, we think there is a need for a work psychology with a more coherent focus on the worker, on the experience of work, on work experience from the worker’s point of view. There is a need for a better grasp of “man working.” Not man the configuration of organizationally relevant properties, constructs chosen or discarded in the service of understanding organizational effectiveness, but man feeling at work. Man thinking at work. There is a need for a more person-centric work psychology.

A person-centric work psychology can be wide ranging. It can focus on experiences as subjective states that range from the very momentary (anger, arousal, fear, flow, etc.) to states that have a longer time frame (depression, anxiety, boredom) to experiences that are even longer (well-being, happiness). It can focus on the histories people create about their work, the narratives that they use to tell their work stories, and the way they integrate work into their life stories. It can focus on what work means to people or the personal “problems” people attempt to solve at work and by working. But regardless of the time frame or focus, the person in all of his or her subjectivity needs to be the center of attention.
Experiencing work

In the next two sections we will elaborate on some of the points we have thus far only briefly stated. We will first describe in more detail what we believe to be the current paradigm of I–O research and then present an alternative approach. Later we will outline some of our own ideas about research topics more consistent with the alternative we are proposing.

The Prevailing Paradigm

In our judgment, two overriding elements characterize the prevailing paradigm. The first is what we call the “between-entities assumption.” The second we call the “collective purpose agenda.”

The Between-Entities Assumption

The between-entities assumption is the belief that explanation is best accomplished when properties are assigned to people and the association of those properties examined.

Imagine a box (Figure 1). It has height. It has width. It has volume. It has weight. Some of these properties are relevant for problems in which the box participates. If a shipping company wants to fill a truck most efficiently it needs to know the dimensions of the box. The weight is relevant to issues of air transportation and the like.

Now imagine a worker (Figure 2). He has height. He has weight. He has intelligence. He has “job satisfaction.” He is an object for the I–O psychologist, a collection of properties, no less than the box is a collection of properties for the shipping company. His integrity as a person is discarded in favor of his description as a collection of properties. This is the essence of the current paradigm.

In the prevailing paradigm almost all key constructs are conceptualized as properties of people, and most studies seek explanation by associating one property of people with other properties of people or with properties of the workplace. This is true both for constructs that make sense as properties and constructs that do not. Skills and abilities, of course, but affect too by way of job satisfaction or other attitudes are treated as properties of people. For example, “Sally is high on job satisfaction”; “Sally can be characterized as a satisfied person. Sam cannot.” This is the very same model as “Sally can be characterized as a skilled person and Sam cannot”; “Sally can be characterized as a high performer and Sam cannot.” In the predominant paradigm, key variables are conceptualized as properties of people, and if a construct doesn’t make sense
as a property of people (e.g., emotional states), it is twisted into a new construct that does make sense in this paradigm (e.g., job satisfaction or affective commitment) or it is measured in property-like ways (“how often are you angry at work?”) and placed in a between-subjects framework. Then the properties are analyzed as parts of structural models of associations. This is what is studied, people as objects with stable properties, differing from each other!

As we have said, we believe that this is a very limiting approach. It turns the people into objects with the intent of identifying, measuring, or changing their “dimensions,” ignoring both the integrity of the person and the personal perspective of working. It doesn’t capture the changes that characterize human experiences and behavior, and it doesn’t capture the subjectivity of experience itself.

The Collective Purpose Agenda

The second element of the current paradigm is the focus on collective purpose. It is well-known that much I–O research is driven by problems identified by others. This is often discussed as the “handmaidens of management” problem. Certainly, being a science that takes its problems from organizational needs (i.e., problems defined by people not part of the scientific community) is clearly part of the existing paradigm and, we would argue, a limiting feature. Yet, framing this as the “servants of power” or “handmaidens of management” problem only serves as a distraction by suggesting that the issue is political instead of conceptual.

Organizations are institutions in which members work for a collective purpose not necessarily of their own creation. Almost all current I–O psychology research topics ultimately have to do with connecting individuals to the collective purpose, to the institutional objectives.1 Essentially, I–O psychology is the study of individuals within systems of collective purpose with the focus on what psychology can contribute to aligning individual behavior with that collective purpose.

Motivation, training, and selection, as they are currently studied, all focus on aligning individual behavior with the collective purpose. Managing individual differences to enhance collective purpose is a topic. Measuring performance along dimensions relevant to the collective purpose is a topic. Increasing fit between persons and systems in order to maximize commitment, satisfaction, or job performance as paths to the collective purpose is a topic. So many of the topics of the field exist because they relate to how individual behavior connects to collective purpose, and how to achieve the collective purpose is the starting point.2 Mostly, I–O is concerned with studying how people can meet or hurt the collective interests of the institutions for whom they work and what can be done about it. The collective purpose, not the people themselves, is the starting point for research problems.

Although the collective purpose framework may have developed for reasons having to do with the needs of modern industrial management, it is currently applied regardless of who sets the collective purpose. It is applied equally to for-profit organizations, unions, government agencies, military units, or people in the Salvation Army or the priesthood. Who sets the collective purpose (management, the members themselves, etc.) is mostly irrelevant to the basic paradigm.

Of course we do not believe that there is anything fundamentally wrong with an interest in aligning individual behavior with how often those other topics are brought to bear on problems of collective purpose, as when occupational health is framed in terms of dollars lost to organizations.

1. Of course not all topics within I–O have collective purpose at their core. Yet, a sufficient number do to make this an important part of the existing paradigm. In addition, it is interesting to note

2. Some have even advocated for this approach, calling for an explicit acknowledgment and practice of inductive theory building, with researchers taking their cues from organizational needs and issues (Locke, 2007).
with collective purpose. Everyone benefits from the efficient functioning of institutions. What we are stressing is that the collective purpose agenda makes enhancing the collective purpose and not the people themselves the starting point for choosing research topics and constructs of interest. Thus, the collective purpose agenda, along with the between-entities assumption, shapes and constrains our research questions.

In Summary

If we were to use a few words to describe the current paradigm it would be something like this: the testing of organization-centric, between-persons structural models of associations among attributes or properties of people, work, or organizations studied with the overall objective of learning how individual behavior can better align with collective purpose. We acknowledge the usefulness of this paradigm for certain purposes but contend that adherence to one paradigm, even a useful one, is ultimately too limiting for a full work psychology. It is time to break out.

A Person-Centric Alternative

So, let us return to our initial question. What would a thoroughly person-centric examination of work look like?

The Subjective Stance

To begin with, it would embrace subjectivity as a topic of study. I–O psychologists are taught to flee from subjectivity. In I–O we use the term “subjective” as if it were a disease. Merriam-Webster defines subjective as “based on personal feelings or experiences, dependent on the mind or an individual’s perceptions for existence.” But what does it mean to be a human being? Isn’t subjectivity the most fundamental feature of human existence? You are reading this essay, perhaps on a computer screen. Isn’t the most fundamental difference between you and the computer the simple fact that you, and not it, are subjectively aware of the experience and can reflect on it? If the concern is collective purpose, a worker’s subjective experience as she carries out her task becomes secondary to the accomplishment of the task itself. If the focus is on the worker, subjective experience becomes important, even primary, because that experience is fundamental to the person.

The Lived-Through Experience

The subjective stance carries with it a focus on personal experience, and so a second important, if not essential, element of a person-centric work psychology is an interest in the lived-through experience of working. We use the phrase “lived-through experience” deliberately to distinguish it from an objective account of “events” independent of the personal experience of those events. Certainly, a science of personal experience will want to pay attention to the things that happen to people but not without an account of the way what happens is experienced by the person. The key element of a real experience is the “living-through” idea, the personal subjective knowledge that you, yourself, are living through the experience or have lived through it. It is the living-through element that is critical, and a person-centric work psychology will want to take account of the nature of the experience itself, the “what it is like” to work or to experience certain events, the subjective feeling, the flow of time, the focus of attention, the search for meaning. What is it like, to the person, to experience injustice, to be bored, to be ostracized, to learn something new? Any person-centric work psychology will want to examine the subjective nature of work experience.

But a person-centric examination of “lived-through experience” need not restrict itself to a narrow phenomenology of the moment. An account of ongoing experience, the “what it is like” to work or to have these work experiences, is an essential part of an account of subjective experiences at work, but it cannot be the only part. Coherent, lived-through experiences are of different durations and are nested
within each other. So, you can think of the experience you’re living through right now, reading this section of our essay. But this activity is nested within other experiences that are, in turn, nested within longer coherent periods of your work life. Still, we cannot escape the moment. Episodes may have happened long in the past, but they are brought to life in the present, and the subjective features of those memories as experienced, their vividness, their first- or third-person perspective, their emotionality, become part of the meaning extracted from them. An examination of the lived-through experiences of work has room for a narrow phenomenology of momentary experience, for broader “life period” experiences, and for everything in between.

The Active Self

Over it all hangs the personal self. The self is the glue that binds all experiences together. Every experience is “my” experience. In every moment of full and complete absorption, there is still a pre-reflective understanding that this is happening to me. Autobiographical memory is, by definition, a personal memory of “my” experiences. Even when the remembered events are false, it is the belief that they happened to me that makes them powerful. A person-centric work psychology is at its core a psychology of the self at work.

Again, the reader may say that the self is already an important topic of I–O research. After all, self-concepts, such as self-esteem and self-efficacy, are popular constructs. Agreed, but by and large that research follows the existing paradigm by studying the self as object, measuring its properties, and correlating those properties with outcomes of organizational interest. The fact that in measuring self-esteem, for example, the researcher asks workers to reflect on themselves does not invalidate the general point. Essentially, workers are being asked to join in the task of objectification.

A person-centric work is of necessity a work psychology imbued with the self, not the self as object but instead the self as source of perspective, the self as ever-present agent. In a person-centric work psychology the self cannot simply be a topic of study. It has to be part of every topic of study.

In Summary

To summarize, a person-centric work psychology is a psychology of the self, working. It is a work psychology that preserves the integrity of the person. It is a work psychology that derives its problems and projects from the human experience of working, broadly defined. It seeks to develop a research agenda out of the personal and subjective, out of questions about the personal experience of work, the personal meaning of work. In a person-centric work psychology, questions about organizational effectiveness and fit with collective purpose are subsidiary to a full and focused appreciation of the individual at work.

Persuasion in matters such as these cannot rest on argument alone, on the delineation of differences between opposing points of view. Researchers justifiably require some sense of a specific research agenda. They want to get some idea of what the topics of study will be, what methods will be used, what new puzzles will be solved. They want to know what life will be like with the new framework.

Quite honestly, our current capacity to answer these questions in an explicit fashion is limited. We are presenting a point of view for work psychology. Specific topics and methods must develop organically from the efforts of researchers who share that point of view. In addition, proposing specific problems or posing specific questions runs the very real risk of making the illustrative questions the focus of attention instead of the overall perspective.

Still, we understand the reasons for such a request, and in the next section we will try to offer some thoughts on specific topics as illustrations of our points. What we offer is not meant to be an all-inclusive agenda for a person-centric work psychology. Our
interest is in work experience, and so what we discuss is best understood as a project about work experience nested within a broader person-centric perspective. We hope the readers take these as illustrations and recognize that the validity of the overall position should not rest on how compelling we can make these particular ideas.

**Experiencing Work**

We have been arguing for a work psychology that derives its problems and projects from the human experience of working. But how should “experience” be understood, and what are some of the research questions about work that can be derived from that understanding? In the first of Harvard’s William James Lectures, Dewey (1934) distinguished between two uses of the term experience. One way the term is used is to refer to the nature of an ongoing experience, the feeling of this or that. When your ice cream is too cold you feel it in your throat and your head pounds for a few seconds. This is the experience of eating ice cream that is too cold. Another way the term is used is to refer to broader life experiences, coherent units of personal life episodes. Your first public presentation or your recent vacation at Disneyland or your days in graduate school may come to mind. These are some experiences of your life.

Said another way, experience has properties in the moment. There is a sense of what it is like to work as you are working. Your focus of attention shifts from object to object, from object to self, and back to object. Your affective states ebb and flow. There is a sense of what it is like to experience the myriad events we pay attention to at work, what it is like to be treated badly, to be ostracized, to accomplish something difficult. These senses are real and meaningful to workers as they experience them. Therefore, they must be important to work psychologists.

But experience is not a series of disconnected moments. The self is ever present. Every personal experience is “my” experience, and the self, as active agent, reflects on the experiences, organizes them, and structures them. Research on autobiographical memory (Conway, 1990; Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000) tells us that personal experiences are organized hierarchically with narrow episodes nested within broader life segments and even broader autobiographical narratives. These memories and stories are meaningful personal representations of work experience and complement the momentary sense of what it is like to work.

Of course, we can mix the two uses suggested by Dewey. It makes perfect sense to ask how it felt to give your first presentation. Were you nervous, were you sweating? Did you have fun while you were on that family vacation at Disneyland? Still, a psychology of work experience should preserve the two uses of the term experience while recognizing that both are legitimate topics of inquiry. A project about work experience should, at the very least, be a project that seeks both to understand the ways in which work is experienced as it happens and to understand how people bring structure to the continuous stream of work experience, how they create “experiences” and organize the stories of their work lives.

**Working: What It Is Like**

Zhong and Leonardelli (2008) have recently shown that being ostracized actually makes you feel cold. Part of the experience of being socially excluded is a real, palpable sense of lowered body temperature. That’s the feeling of exclusion as it is happening. Not lowered job satisfaction. Not intent to leave. “I’m cold.” More people report being bored at their jobs than report being stressed (Svendsen, 2008). To be bored has definite qualities, simultaneous feelings of lethargy and restlessness, of being tired but of being unable to “settle” on an activity. Sometimes there is a sense of being trapped (Martin, Sadlo, & Stew, 2006). This is how being bored feels. Work experiences have these subjective components as they happen. In an important sense, this is what it is like to work.
Intrinsic motivation has been a topic of study in organizational psychology for some time. Comparing the way it has predominantly been studied (e.g., Hackman & Oldham, 1976; Humphrey, Nahrgang, & Morgeson, 2007) with the way it is sometimes studied is informative. The predominant approach focuses on the nature of task characteristics and the process links between those characteristics and outcomes of interest to organizations. Mediating variables describe perceptions and beliefs. Experiences are nowhere to be found.3

An alternative perspective is found in the work on flow. This is also a study of intrinsic motivation, and this approach also considers task characteristics (Nielsen & Cleal, 2010). However, the core of the research is the subjective “experiences during which individuals are fully involved in the present moment” and focuses on “the subjective phenomenology of intrinsically motivated behavior” (Nakamura & Czikszentmihalyi, 2002, p. 89). For flow researchers the subjective feeling is the defining feature and the core issue.

What is that subjective feeling of intrinsically motivated behavior? According to Nakamura and Czikszentmihalyi (2002), the experience of flow involves intense and focused concentration, the merging of action and awareness, a loss of reflective self-consciousness, a sense of personal control, and a distortion of temporal experience. This is what intrinsic motivation feels like. This is the core experience. Yet, this subjective feeling is completely missing from the more typical approach, an approach that focuses on job characteristics and their attitudinal or performance outcomes, never mentioning the experience itself. Of course, if your interest is in the outcomes or the utility of various work contexts, perhaps you can afford to ignore the personal experiences of the people working. But if your interest is in the worker, the experience cannot be ignored.

Intrinsic motivation is a place where some preliminary work has been done, but what are the feelings of goal striving, of criticism, of being the recipient of incivility? What are the feelings of injustice? Does procedural injustice feel different from distributive justice or interactional justice? Does justice have a unique feeling at all or is justice all about postexperience reflection?

These are questions that suggest a research agenda that includes but goes beyond the development of a mere compendium of experiential states and feelings. Other research questions come quickly to mind. Is there a common language to describe these experiences, a core set of momentary experiential attributes? Is there a fundamental set of experiential “properties” essential for describing ongoing experience at work? How do attributes of the momentary experience influence the organization and the infusion of meaning into those experiences? As these questions are answered, one might find that constructs of work experience that have been developed independently and treated quite different conceptually feel quite similar to the workers themselves, becoming different only on later reflection. Or one might find that constructs that researchers now conceptualize as one thing are experienced as something else by workers.

This is one way of beginning a study of ongoing work experience: begin with the common occurrences of work and how they “feel.” Another complementary way is to think about the ubiquitous features of conscious experience itself and to take those as starting points for examining the quality and nature of ongoing work experience. Conscious experiences have certain qualities (see Searle, 2005, for a brief discussion), and these qualities offer an entryway into a psychology of work experience.

For example, one of the features of conscious experience is that it is always focused on something, the quality philosophers

3. Ironically, the mediating variables in the job characteristics model are labeled “experienced meaningfulness” and “experienced responsibility,” but actual experiences are neither described nor studied.
call “intentionality” (Gallagher & Zahavi, 2008). This notion of the directedness of consciousness takes us to a fundamental topic in the study of ongoing experience, the direction of attention, and an essential question for the description of ongoing experience has to be “what am I thinking about?” This turns out to be a very broad question, encompassing issues of the contents of consciousness, the regulation of attention, mind wandering, daydreaming, and rumination. These topics are generating quite a bit of interest across various fields of psychology (see Smallwood & Schooler, 2006, for a recent presentation) but have gone relatively unnoticed in I–O psychology. But because the directedness of consciousness is a fundamental feature of conscious experience, it can’t be ignored in any study of ongoing work experience.

Similarly, psychologists and philosophers alike have suggested that affect in some form is also a fundamental quality of conscious experience. Feldman-Barrett and Russell (1998) take the position that all conscious experience contains some level of “core affect,” a combination of the subjective feelings of pleasure–displeasure and arousal. Similarly, Searle (2005) contends that affect is a fundamental component of all conscious subjective experiences.

Whether or not affect is an essential part of conscious experience, it is such a ubiquitous part that it cannot be ignored in most circumstances, and it provides a window into a more person-centric work psychology. Why? Because emotion is nothing if it isn’t an experiential variable. As Feldman-Barrett, Mesquita, Ochsner, and Gross (2007) point out, the essential element of emotion is subjective experience. There is no emotion without the subjective experience. The conscious experience, the mental representation, is the key.

The idea that affect is an essential component of consciousness is an important one because it changes the way to think about affect and emotions. Traditionally, researchers think of affective states as coming in “packets” turned on and off by events. But if consciousness has an inherent affective component and consciousness is continuous, then so too is affect. As a consequence, the issue of the experience of affect gets bound to the first aspect of consciousness—intentionality and the focus of attention. By this account, an emotional experience involves turning our attention to our affect, and the factors that influence our attentional focus should influence the effects of emotional states and stimuli.

It also means that from an experiential point of view, the “feel” of emotional change has properties that can be studied as complementary to the feel of the individual emotions themselves. Recently, the concept of “affect spin” has been introduced to the literature (Kuppens, Van Mechelen, Nezlek, Dossche, & Timmerman, 2007). Extending the ideas of Moskowitz and Zuroff (2004) on variability in personality-related behaviors, affect spin is an assessment of movement from affective state to affective state. If affect is continuous then the sense of spin, the experience of both transition and variability, should be meaningful to workers and therefore to work psychologists.

Attention and affect are parts of the immediate sense of experience and at least affect has received a fair amount of attention in the I–O literature. But these are not the only qualities of immediate conscious experience that are worth examining. Other properties include the flow of time at work; the focus on the self, or, alternatively, the loss of self-consciousness while working; the senses of fatigue, of purpose, of restlessness/ and above all the unified sense of it all. Above all, the sense that these are not pieces of work experience, these are all parts of one’s own experience. A project on work experience should take Dewey’s first use of the term experience very seriously. It should ask “what is it like to be working, what is it like to be at work?”

**Structuring Experience**

Every unit of experience, from the broadest description of the entirety of a life to the most momentary sense of “now” is the product of an organizing activity of the self.
Take the moment. Kolakowski (1978) writes that humans “are constantly moving from a past that has ceased to be into a future that does not exist…. They live in a present that vanishes even as it comes to be, and then can only be revealed through memory” (p. 13). William James (1890/2007) referred to this as the “specious present.” By this account, there is no real present that can be objectively defined. Yet, subjectively, people have no trouble distinguishing the present from the past and the future. The present may be a psychological construction, but it is a construction that people are well capable of making. They slice up the past and future into chunks close in time and call it the present. Even “now,” the most fundamental unit of experience, bears the imprint of a self-creating structure.

This problem of how work experience is organized and structured, the problem of “life’s experiences” in Dewey’s second use of the term, can be approached in a number of ways. To begin with, one can ask how ongoing work experiences are meaningfully segmented as they unfold. Here we are talking about the structure people give to work life as it flows through the day, how they create the units that become coherent episodes of experience and then how they later organize those episodes; determine what types they are, what general problems they inform, what meanings they have; and select some as salient and throw others away. “What did you do at work today?” is a question answered so naturally that one can forget that it requires an active self, organizing a continuous stream of experience.

The segmentation of ongoing experience is a relatively old topic recently rediscovered. Barker (1963, 1968) was the first that we know of to systematically discuss how the stream of daily living is organized into discrete units with coherent themes, and Newston and Engquist (1976) studied how people segment the stream of ongoing behavior they observe in others. Recently, Zacks, Speer, Swallow, Braver, and Reynolds (2007) have reenergized this research with the development of event segmentation theory. Perceived event boundaries seem to be associated with such observables as large motor movements of the actors and changes in actor’s stimulus conditions as well as inferences about changes in actor goals. As interesting as this research is, it is almost entirely about segmentation of observed behavior streams in others not one’s own. Although connections to how we segment the stream of our own behavior are discussed, they are neither compelling nor have they generated much research.

We know of little work in the I–O literature on the problem of segmentation. Beal, Weiss, Barros, and MacDermid (2005) have talked of “performance episodes” as “naturally segmented, relatively short episodes thematically organized around work-relevant immediate goals or desired end states” (p. 1055) and see these as part of a broader episodic structure to work that people use to think and talk about their workday, but they have yet to test these ideas empirically. Clearly, there is work to be done about both the way ongoing work experience is episodically structured and the meaning (e.g., affect, judged importance, and informativeness) given to each episode.

**Autobiography and Personal Narrative**

Focusing on the segmentation of the ongoing stream of behavior, although important for understanding work experiences, can encourage one to lose sight of the simultaneous presence of continuity in those experiences. Although structure is created out of continuity, continuity always remains. At all times there is a continuous sense that each experience is my experience. The self binds the experiences together, while shaping and being shaped by the meaning of each experience. Structure is created, but continuity is not lost.

Continuity is the critical issue in another way of thinking about the structure and organization of work experience, a way of thinking captured by the notions of autobiographical memory and personal
narratives. As Conway and Pleydell-Pearce (2000) state “Autobiographical memory is of fundamental significance for the self, for emotions, and for the experience of personhood, that is, for the experience of enduring as an individual.” It is the full record we have and hold about our lives. It contains both information we know about ourselves, declarative knowledge like the date of one’s birth or the college one attended, and vivid memories of specific experiences, episodic memories like the birth of a child or being humiliated by a professor in college.

Yet, autobiographical memory is not some mere catalog of personal information and events. It is an organized history of one’s life. The term autobiographical memory carries with it the most common metaphor for a personal life structure, a narrative with chapters, places, characters, scenes, and so forth, and this metaphor has been very useful in capturing the way autobiographical memory is structured and seems to us. Conway and his associates have described the nested structure of autobiographical memory with varying degrees of specificity, and most researchers accept this position or some variant of it. Personal narratives contain longer life periods (those wonderful years in graduate school), general events (those bike rides in the country), and specific episodes (the time when I was in graduate school, fell off my bike, and broke my leg).

As one might expect, there is a rather large literature on autobiographical memory that cuts across many areas of research. For example, research has shown that the autobiographical memories of depressed patients lack specificity (Williams, Barnhofer, Crane, Hermans, Raes, Watkins, et al., 2007); some episodic memories have a first-person focus, in which people remember the event as they initially experienced it, and others have a third-person quality, as if they were watching themselves relive the event.

Memory is not the only area where the concept of narrative has been found to be useful. McAdams (McAdams, 1993; McAdams, Josselson, & Lieblich, 2006) is perhaps the researcher best known for the study of personal or self-narratives in the context of studying individual personalities and self-identity. For McAdams, people create stories “about themselves to define who they are for themselves and others” (McAdams, Josselson, & Lieblich, 2006, p. 4). They use the stories to create coherence out of “scattered” life experiences, and with the elements of the stories, the events of course, but also the characters, the tone, the overall theme, people define themselves and then use the narratives as guides for behavior.

Are these issues fundamental to the nature of personal work experience? Of course they are, but very little is known how work is integrated into people’s life stories. Is work a separate chapter or part of every chapter? Does that matter? How do episodes figure into the writing of the chapters, and how do the chapter themes determine what episodes are made part of the permanent story? Perhaps we are pushing this metaphor too far, but we do so to emphasize that workers bring structure to their daily experiences and reflect on the wholeness of their lives and bring structure to that as well. Both are parts of a study of work experience.

One last point needs to be made. Episodic memory can be about events of yesterday or events in the distant past. Autobiographical narratives can refer to narrow or broad periods of time. Yet, in each case, the memory, the story, is recovered or constructed in the moment. Contrary to poetic metaphor, memory doesn’t take people back into the past. Memory brings the past to the present. Every memory is an experience happening now and has experiential properties of the moment that are meaningful and may influence how the memory is used.

Clearly then, the effects of memories or narratives cannot be studied entirely in terms of their informational content. To think about how workers’ personal memories and stories and narratives influence peoples’ judgments and behaviors, to try to
understand how they use them and how they experience them, one has to examine both the past and the present of memories. One has to examine both the informational content and the way they are experienced as they are recalled.

This point has not been lost on memory researchers. For Tulving (2002) episodic memory is all about the phenomenological experience, the clear subjective awareness that we are traveling back in time (his language, not ours) and recalling a personal event. He refers to this as “autonoetic awareness,” a unified image of people, plus activities, plus settings, and a real sense that it happened to me. For Tulving, autonoetic memory is a real experiential state of the moment. Hoerl (2006) points out that the ability to tie autonoetic awareness to some declarative knowledge allows for a level of belief verification that is otherwise unavailable. Having that personal autonoetic awareness that you shut off the coffee maker allows for real certainty, certainty that doesn’t accompany your spouse telling you that you shut it off or knowing that you always shut it off.

Sutin and Robins (2007) have developed a scale to assess the actual phenomenological experience of autobiographical memory. The scale tries to capture various features of the memory, such things like its vividness, coherence, sensory detail recalled, and clarity of time and place. D’Argembeau and Van Der Linden (2004), Rice and Rubin (2009), and others have described the importance of visual perspective in episodic and autobiographical memories, whether, in recall, you see the event occurring from the first-person perspective in which you initially lived it or from the perspective of an observer watching yourself experience the episode. These are features of the memory as recalled. Interesting in their own right as ways in which the past comes to the present, they are also potentially important as influences on the way personal history is used to make judgments or influence future behavior.

Of course, this takes us full circle, from the nature of experience, to the creation and use of experiences, and then back to the experience of experiential recall. All along our goal was to think about the human experience of work, what it feels like to work, and how we structure the flow of that experience to create meaningful units, small and large, but manage to maintain a continuity in it all. We do not claim that this is all there is to the study of work experience nor that this focus on subjective experience is the best way to start a more person-centric work psychology. We only claim that a work psychology that focuses on the worker must, of necessity, take account of the personal, subjective experience of work, and we have offered some ideas to begin that effort.

**Discussion**

In the past few years we have seen an explosion of interest in work and workers. Not in organizations but in working. Work-oriented reality shows are everywhere (e.g., *Dirty Jobs, Deadliest Catch*). Philosophers and essayists have turned their attention to working, with books like Sennett’s (2008) *The Craftsman*, de Botton’s (2009) *The Pleasures and Sorrows of Work*, and Crawford’s (2009) *Shop Class as Soulcraft*. Essays appear in magazines and newspapers about working and other outcroppings of culture (for example, the *NY Times Book Review* recently published a piece entitled “Take This Job and Write It,” which discussed the portrayal of work in modern fiction, March 14, 2010).

We are in a moment in history in which working, that is people working, has moved to the foreground of cultural attention. But where is the science of work and working while this is happening? As a field, this is our topic, yet we are nowhere to be found. Are we going to continue to watch from the sidelines? Are we going to cede the topic of working and work experience to the philosophers while we, the psychologists of working, continue to focus on organizations? *Ice Road Truckers* is about people driving their trucks. I–O psychology seems mostly to be
about whether their legs are long enough to reach the pedals.

In this essay we have tried to stimulate thoughts about an alternative direction for our field. In the first part of the essay we described two contrasting paradigms, an organization-centric paradigm, a paradigm that we believe to be predominant in I–O psychology, and a person-centric paradigm that more deliberately and intentionally focuses on people working. In the second part of the essay we outlined, in very broad terms, a research agenda on work experience that we believe to be consistent with a more person-centric approach to work psychology.

A few concluding remarks are in order before we give way to the commentaries. First, paradigms describe a modal way of thinking. We believe that our description of the organization-centric paradigm and our assertion of its predominance are both true, even as the reader can find research that deviates from it. Second, paradigms are often limiting in ways that go unnoticed by people working within them. Researchers might make person-centric arguments for why they study constructs developed within the organization-centric mind-set. We don’t doubt the sincerity of the arguments, but to a great extent the central topics of inquiry are already given, developed decades ago and for reasons better suited to one paradigm than the other. The same is true for the methods used to conduct the research. Would not a person-centric work psychology developing on its own have its own, more pertinent constructs and methods? One does not have to accept what has been given, and no amount of good intentions will allow a person-centric work psychology to develop out of an organization-centric one.

Third, it is important that our position not be taken as simply an argument for qualitative research or the abandonment of “objective” science. As has been stated many times, a distinction can be made between subjectivity as a topic of study and subjectivity in the methods of study. Our person-centric approach argues for letting subjective human experience guide the choice of topics. We are convinced that this agenda can be studied rigorously and in a manner consistent with psychological science.

Fourth, our examples of research within a person-centric work psychology, examples relating to the study of lived-through work experience, are examples that represent our own interests. They are certainly not exhaustive of a person-centric approach. There is lots of room for other topics. Of course we hope readers will find our specific thoughts to be interesting, but our real objective is to encourage research infused with working peoples’ personal, subjective experience. We hope to encourage a research agenda that reflects the human experience of working, the personal experience of work, the personal meaning of work, the full and focused appreciation of the individual at work.

Fifth, a careful reader, still interested in what we have to say, might be thinking something like this, “experiences, personal narratives, subjectivity . . . you make it seem like all there is to work psychology is in the worker’s head.” Actually, we understand why a reader might come away thinking like that, given the discussion of work experience that has gone on so far. But this is not our position. Our discussion has been about the experience of working, but work is not a purely imaginative activity. Working is always in the context of doing something and doing it somewhere. It is an activity in the world, of people connecting to the world. A person-centric work psychology might be about how “work feels to me,” but to be complete it has to study “work” and “me” together.

No one would suggest that research embedded in the existing paradigm ignores properties of the task or workplace. Quite the contrary is true. But like the worker, the world that workers work in can also be too much abstracted and objectified, and done so according to principles and desires not relevant to a person-centric approach. A person-centric work psychology will look at the world through the eyes of the worker.
It will take work in the raw, all the sights and sounds and tasks and people that run by the worker everyday. The worker experiences all of it, not demarcated parts of it. She organizes and partitions it to be sure, but it is her organization that must interest us.

Finally, the articulation of two paradigms does not imply the superiority of one over another. Nor is our essay about the science versus practice debate that too often occupies attention. As stated earlier, everyone has an interest in the effective functioning of social institutions. Still, one’s social interests need not be one’s scholarly interests. As work psychologists, our scholarly interests lie with the psychology of work and working, and we believe that a paradigm better suited to those interests can be articulated and support a new and exciting research agenda.

That said, we recognize that I–O psychology is a field of science and practice and that practitioners (who we hope are still with us) might be accepting of our arguments but remain unclear about their implications. We feel very strongly that, although we advocate an approach in which research is initiated by a focus on the person and not by a focus on the interests of the organization, knowledge generated by that research can inform practice as well. After all, medicine is informed by research in molecular biology not stimulated by issues of health or illness, just as engineering is informed by basic research on physics. We think both research and practice can gain from an evolutionary step forward catalyzed by a dedicated focus on the subjective experiences of people working. Most, perhaps all, I–O interventions follow a path that includes worker subjective experiences. How much is known of those experiences, and how well do these experiences inform what is developed? Are current practices too much driven by “man as merely an idea”? Not being practitioners, we are not in a position to answer these questions or to provide specific suggestions about how practice might change. Instead we hope that our thoughts will stimulate those with a more practice orientation.

We started by asking the question “What would a thoroughly person-centric examination of work be like?” Along the way we admitted to being “haunted by a sense that much of what is studied seems trivial and uninteresting.” We warned the reader that our essay would be mostly “an argument in favor of a psychology of working, studied from the worker’s point of view.” Perhaps we failed to warn the reader about how personal our reflections would be and how much development they need. Still, we believe there are those who share our dissatisfaction with the current state of affairs. We believe there are those who are also convinced of the need to develop a work psychology that begins with a “full and focused appreciation of the individual at work.”

References


