We agree with Weiss and Rupp’s (2011) basic description of the paradigm used within much of industrial–organizational (I–O) psychology, namely, that it is characterized by what they call the between-entities assumption and the collective purpose agenda, focused on aligning individual behavior with collective purpose. This has been the general paradigm in U.S. I–O psychology. But work psychology, especially outside the United States, has not exclusively focused on furthering organizational needs: It has also concerned itself with the whole person and how work affects the individual worker as a person. Thus, the increased internationalization of our field has begun a healthy attenuation of these paradigmatic differences and resulted in an increased interest in the worker not only in relation to organizations’ needs but as an integrated, whole person.

North America and Europe: Differences in Research and Practice

There are some areas where there are clear differences between U.S. and European I–O in terms of an organization versus person focus. Personnel selection is a large area of practice among U.S. I–O psychologists, and it is given for most personnel selection systems in the United States to focus exclusively on organizational needs. For example, it is typical among U.S. employers not to provide feedback to job applicants. But in many European countries, employers are expected to consider the needs of job applicants as well by providing feedback to applicants about their performance on selection tests. Although we do not necessarily advocate the latter approach or believe it is superior—in fact, providing feedback might not help job applicants in the absence of someone to assist with interpretation of test results—this is an example of how the selection paradigm in much of Europe considers the job applicant as an actual person and recognizes that the experience of applying for a job and receiving feedback can affect the job applicant personally, even those applicants not hired by the organization. In short, this approach implicitly treats the applicant as a whole person.

Relatedly, the study of applicant reactions has developed in the past few decades (e.g., Truxillo & Bauer, 2010). In the United States, much of the interest in applicant reactions has focused on how these reactions affect the employer, whether through
improved applicant attraction or decreased litigation. These are indisputably important issues. However, in Europe, a broader approach to applicant reactions has been developing for many years, and this broader approach has included the job applicant as a person and how the person is affected by the selection process (e.g., Salgado, Anderson, & Hulsheger, 2010). Furthermore, this approach led to the concept of “social validity” and a focus on the dignity and respect with which applicants are treated (Schuler, 1993). In short, selection systems not only affect organizations, but they affect people as well. In addition, they affect people not only in terms of whether or not they get a job but also in terms of their self-efficacy and self-esteem, and possibly even their stress levels, dignity, and perceived self-worth. In other words, there is more going on in the selection context than an organization making a hiring decision.

Another example of a European focus on the person is the longstanding interest of European researchers in the study of the meaning of work (e.g., MOW International Research Team, 1987), an issue that Weiss and Rupp note as lacking in I–O. This tradition of research on the meaning of work is represented by cross-cultural work in the 1980s on the meaning of work (MOW International Research Team, 1987) and studies on work values (e.g., Dose, 1997; Loughlin & Barling, 2001). We note that much of this research on the meaning of work is inherently more related to the individual person, that is, societal and cultural processes (i.e., work socialization for the individual person) rather than strictly organizational processes (i.e., organizational socialization for the benefit of the employer). The meaning of work and work values are important aspects of individuals’ beliefs that could influence their professional histories, career choices, and level of involvement in the work sphere.

Part of this U.S./European distinction can be found in disciplinary names, definitions, and implications. In the United States, the focus has been on two areas of study—industrial and organizational—whose objectives have been the advancement of the collective or organizational goals. In Europe, the name—work and organizational—provides attention to “work,” which is a human activity that can be studied without any reference to the collective organization or management needs and includes a focus on the individual experiences of organizational members.

The Integration of Organization and Individual Experience

Other areas of study that have emerged in both the United States and Europe already do examine the whole individual, their context, and experiences. First, career research takes a dynamic view, examining the individual experience of work over time. For instance, Arnold (1997) defines careers not only as an objective sequence of positions in the labor market or in an organization but also as a subjective experience that includes the interpretation of personal history and the meaning people give to their professional experience over time. Thus, the analysis concerns an individual’s history, transitions, turning points, and choices in relation to a changing social or organizational context and considers the person as an entity not as a sum of “variables.” Some approaches to careers (e.g., career anchors; Schein, 1993) examine the meaning of work and work values in relation to the development of identity (Hall, 2004).

A second example is the recent interest in time as a variable. Weiss and Rupp point out that the dominant paradigm ignores personal perspectives, that is, the narrative reconstruction of work experience. Although this is largely true, recent research and theory has begun to take this approach. For instance, Roe (2008) calls for more attention to “temporal thinking” instead of “differential thinking.” Such research acknowledges the element of time in phenomena and considers the story of an individual. Methodologically, it means
developing studies with high-density, frequent measurement occasions to study the temporal change in psychological phenomena. This approach is already moving us from a differential analysis to a historical and temporal analysis of individuals.

Benefits of International Collaboration

Similar to Weiss and Rupp, we are not advocating that we study personal experience without attention to contextual influences or that we abandon the organizational perspective, but that we take a more balanced view where individuals and their experiences are taken into account. We think that increased international collaboration, in terms of both research and practice, has led and will lead to important paradigmatic shifts within our field, presenting a broader, more complete view not only of how the person fits into their work organization but also how the person experiences work as part of his or her whole life.

As a concluding point, we note that the field has promoted international collaborations for a number of reasons, for instance, to improve our understanding of cross-cultural differences at work and, more recently, as a means of increasing the visibility of our field. These are both excellent reasons to promote international collaborations, but we would add yet another: that such collaboration can also profoundly affect the way that researchers and practitioners think about their field.

References


