Person-Centric Work Psychology: Additional Insights Into Its Tradition, Nature, and Research Methods

SONGQI LIU, YUJIE ZHAN, AND MO WANG
University of Maryland

In the focal article, Weiss and Rupp (2011) argued for a person-centric focus on conducting research in industrial–organizational (I–O) psychology. According to them, it is fundamentally important to study work from a subjective stance to understand workers’ lived-through experiences. We agree with the focal article’s emphasis on adopting a more person-centric perspective in I–O psychology research. In this commentary, we provide some additional insights into the tradition, nature, and research methods of person-centric work psychology.

Person-Centric Perspective as a Traditional and Ongoing Research Theme in I–O Psychology

Although the focal article has characterized the prevailing paradigm of I–O psychology research as overly emphasizing organizational needs and benefits, an important research branch of I–O psychology has paid extensive attention to employees’ work-related experience. In particular, occupational health psychology (OHP) is such a specialty area applying psychology to improve the quality of work life and to protect and promote the safety, health, and well-being of workers (Sauter, Hurrell, Fox, Tetrick, & Barling, 1999). In fact in the past 5 years (2005–2009), more than 70% of articles published in Journal of Occupational Health Psychology, the leading journal in this area, focused on individual benefits (e.g., stress and strain, work interference with family, physical health, individual coping behaviors, and job and life satisfaction) rather than organizational benefits (e.g., job performance, intention to quit, and absenteeism) as their outcome variables. In particular, the research in the field of OHP has contributed significantly to our understanding of workers’ experiences, including both long-term experiences (e.g., well-being, depression, and boredom) and momentary psychological states (e.g., anger, arousal, and flow). A large number of studies in OHP have been conducted to study the long-term experiences of workers. For example, job burnout is studied as a psychological reaction to ongoing work stress that gradually depletes workers’ intrinsic energetic resources over time, resulting in the expression of emotional exhaustion, physical fatigue, and cognitive weariness. Studies have been conducted to explore the components and mechanisms of job burnout for almost 3 decades now (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). More recently, the development and application of new methods (e.g., daily diary design...
and experience sampling methods) in OHP have prompted more research attention to workers’ short-term experiences as well as the antecedents and consequences of these experiences. For example, Sonnentag, Binnewies, and Mojza (2008) collected data on employees’ off-work experiences before bedtime (i.e., psychological detachment from work, relaxation, and mastery experiences) and sleep quality and affective states on the following morning (i.e., positive and negative activation, serenity, and fatigue) for 5 weekdays. Their findings demonstrated the effects of recovery-from-work experiences and sleep quality on employees’ morning affect. Liu, Wang, Zhan, and Shi (2009) and Wang, Liu, Zhan, and Shi (2010) also conducted daily diary studies investigating the effects of daily experience of work stress and work–family conflict on employees’ alcohol use after work. These examples clearly demonstrate a research interest in employees beyond the collective benefits of organizations. Given the abundant research that focuses on both workers’ long- and short-term experiences, we believe that person-centric work psychology not only has a long tradition in I–O psychology but also constitutes a major ongoing research theme in this field.

The Dynamic Nature of Person-Centric Work Psychology

In the focal article, Weiss and Rupp emphasized the role of studying “experiences” in person-centric work psychology. We agree with them that employees’ subjective experiences are important in deriving research questions in work psychology. However, we would like to go one step further and emphasize that it is particularly important to study the dynamic nature of those experiences in advancing person-centric work psychology.

First, experiences themselves are dynamic in nature. As such, describing experience in a static manner may limit our ability to understand the underlying process comprehensively. The focal article made an important point to encourage researchers to carefully structure experiences that are organized hierarchically. Given such hierarchy, we argue that researchers should not stop at describing what employees think or feel at a single time point or during a single work episode. Instead, it is essential to examine the changes in experiences by collecting data at multiple time points or through a longer time period. Furthermore, it is also important to examine the interrelations among experiences at different time points. For instance, taking the retirement process as an example, preretirement planning, retirement decision making, and postretirement adjustment are all experiences nested in the whole span of the retirement process. However, they are not separate but interrelated experiences that may influence each other in terms of the length and direction of the process (Wang & Shultz, 2010). Therefore, emphasizing the dynamic nature of person-centric work psychology suggests researchers look beyond the description of experience as a snapshot; rather, the fluctuations of employees’ feelings, perceptions, and behaviors; the potential reasons for and consequences of these fluctuations; as well as the interrelations among different experiences over time should be the focus of person-centric work psychology.

Second, emphasizing studying the dynamic nature of experiences also acknowledges the fact that workers can actively shape their experiences. From a person-centric perspective, people do not merely perceive, feel, and respond to their work passively; instead, they also take an active role in bringing in the dynamic changes to their work. As an active self, people reflect and describe their experiences from their own standpoint. Moreover, they are also able to modify their work and social contexts that may shape their work experiences later. Therefore, a person-centric work psychology should call for research attention on the active role of people at work. To capture the dynamic nature of experiences, person-centric work psychology should give more consideration to employees’ willingness and confidence
Person-centric work psychology: Additional insights

(e.g., agency efficacy) and behavioral tendencies (e.g., proactive behaviors) in influencing their experiences.

Third, in spite of the focus on people as the core of research, the role of environment should not be overlooked. A dynamic perspective of person-centric work psychology should also accommodate the effect of dynamic changes in the environment. Work context, either physical or psychosocial, is able to influence the feelings, perceptions, and behaviors of employees. As such, changes in contextual factors may facilitate or constrain certain experiences. For example, in contemporary organizations, employees may face the increase of diversity in both demographics and knowledge backgrounds. They have to adapt themselves according to the changing work environment to keep being effective in both interpersonal interaction and task performance, which shapes their experiences at work as well. Drawing on the theoretical framework of person–environment fit, the dynamic changes of people and environment may impact each other. Thus, emphasizing studying the dynamic nature of workers’ experiences also requires a more careful treatment of the changing work environment.

Person-centered methods have been illustrated by recent research using configural methods to study workers and their work life. Rather than accounting for relationships among variables, configural methods (e.g., latent class cluster analysis) focus on accounting for relationships among people, where all variables are considered jointly as they define distinct profiles explaining the standings of multiple individuals (Zyphur, 2009). This person-centered approach helps researchers to identify different and internally cohesive subpopulations, which may be associated with different attitudinal and behavioral patterns. For example, cluster analysis has been used to identify subgroups of workers with different profiles of organizational commitment facets (Sinclair, Tucker, Cullen, & Wright, 2005) and strategies for coping with sexual harassment (Cortina & Wasti, 2005).

Person-centered methods have also been used in longitudinal studies to capture the unobserved subgroups of workers who exhibit different dynamic processes (e.g., growth mixture modeling; Wang & Bodner, 2007; mixture latent Markov modeling; Wang & Chan, in press). These applications of person-centered methods are particularly relevant to conducting person-centric work psychology research because workers’ subjective experiences are likely to change over time. Being able to link different workers (rather than isolated properties) with different patterns of change trajectories or qualitative shifts in subjective experiences, the integrity of the worker as a
person is maximally preserved. These methods also provide advantages for applying the findings of person-centric work psychology in practice because after models of workers’ longitudinal subjective experiences are established it is possible to classify other workers based on their experiences.

**Conclusion**

Weiss and Rupp’s article elaborated a research agenda for developing a person-centric work psychology with an emphasis on ongoing personal experiences. We applaud their focus and agree with the authors that I–O psychology should not be limited to studying isolated properties but preserve the integrity of the people. In this commentary, we have provided three additional points to complement Weiss and Rupp’s agenda. Specifically, we acknowledge that there is a long tradition in I–O psychology that focuses on the experiences of working individuals. Future research endorsing a person-centric perspective could benefit from drawing on this tradition. Second, we suggest that it is particularly important to study the dynamic nature of workers’ experiences in advancing person-centric work psychology. A comprehensive understanding of person in the workplace requires the examination of not only experience itself but also its fluctuation over time as well as its interplay with the environment. Third, we suggest that an important starting point for conducting person-centric work psychology research should be to understand the differences among workers as whole persons rather than their differences in terms of isolated properties. Accordingly, we highlight the importance of using person-centered methods to conduct person-centric work psychology research.

**References**


