
The Science, Practice, and Morality of Work Psychology

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Weiss and Rupp (2011) make a compelling case for the promotion of an individualistic (person-centric) perspective for research in work psychology. My response is “Yes, and...” In other words, I believe that they have called attention to an issue and some of its attendant limitations on our field that are considerably more complex, multifaceted, and even more important than they have articulated. I argue below that a “full and focused appreciation of the individual at work” must extend beyond the perspective of descriptive scientific research to include social, normative, and moral matters.

It’s Not Just Our Science

Weiss and Rupp have chosen to focus exclusively on our science, arguing for a more person-centric direction for research in industrial–organizational (I–O) psychology. But “a profession is marked not only by its scientific and theoretical underpinnings and the effectiveness of its instrumental practice but by its moral or normative stance regarding human well-being” (Lefkowitz, 2003, p. 294). And the point to be emphasized is that these three elements of a profession are invariably highly interrelated; it is incomplete, perhaps fruitless, to advocate

significant change in one facet without accounting for that interconnectedness. For example, much I–O psychology research is in fact driven by nonscientific organizational objectives reflecting business values and criteria (Lefkowitz, 1990, 2003, 2010a). Weiss and Rupp acknowledge as much when they note that many of the topics of the field exist because they relate to how individual behavior connects to the collective purpose. But more importantly, they fail to acknowledge that the benign-sounding “collective purpose” of organizations all too often reflects a values system that is harmful to workers and detrimental to their interests (cf. Lefkowitz, 2005, 2008, 2009, 2010a, in press). The failure to appreciate the interconnected moral facet of the profession and the organizations we serve leads to a perception of I–O psychology as “studying how people can meet or hurt the collective interests of the institutions for whom they work” but not vice versa.

Why Is the Current Perspective Dominant?

Weiss and Rupp do not offer any explicit reflections on the crucial matter of *why*? Why is the organization-centric perspective dominant? And why is there no salient person-centric perspective in the field? At the risk of doing the authors an injustice, I infer a reason for their restraint from the following passage:

It is well-known that much I–O research is driven by problems identified by

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others. This is often discussed as the “handmaidens of management” problem. Certainly, being a science that takes its problems from organizational needs . . . 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* (emphasis added).

It is on this point, I think, that the authors and I most clearly part company. The issue is, indeed, conceptual in nature; but it is not merely conceptual, if that is meant to connote *neutral*, simply *descriptive*, or *value free*. It is also not only a limiting feature. It is, in fact, very much political (although I would prefer the term *ideological* or *value laden*), and it is anything but a distraction. It goes to the very heart of the matter. It is crucial because the espoused *descriptive* person-centric view is not readily separable from a normative- or morally driven empathic and humanistic approach to individual workers and their circumstances. And that, then, forces a consideration of the managerialist biases, antilabor history, and lack of societal concern that have been integral aspects of our organization-centric perspective (Baritz, 1960; Katzell & Austin, 1992; Kornhauser, 1947; Lefkowitz, 2003, 2008, 2009, 2010a; Zickar & Gibby, 2007). After all, the “others” in the other-centric perspective who are identifying the problems that drive our research are generally not lower-level employees, consumer groups, union representatives, local community members, civil rights proponents, environmental activists, or even social scientists for that matter.

The Positivist Versus Postmodernist Controversy

The astute reader may recognize that much of the criticism of the currently dominant paradigm in I–O psychology offered by Weiss and Rupp and their suggested

changes reflect tenets of postmodern social science and its criticism of traditional positivist natural science applied to the study of human beings. Therefore, much of the intellectual groundwork for Weiss and Rupp’s agenda has been laid. As Howard (1985) put it, “if humans possess characteristics that are unlike the characteristics of subject matters studied by other sciences, then an appropriate science of human behavior might need to be somewhat different from other extant sciences” (pp. 259–260). That includes Weiss and Rupp’s concern for the subjective stance, the lived-through experience, the active self (more frequently denoted as *reflexivity* and *agency*), an emphasis on conscious experience, and the use of autobiography and personal narrative. In my own more extensive treatment of the issues (Lefkowitz, 2003), I’ve added tenets of a phenomenological and contextualized perspective; the centrality of language and rejection of representationalism; socially constructed, value-laden truths; and especially pertinent for I–O psychologists, the postmodern challenge to the distinction between science and practice (cf. Hoshmand & Polkinghorne, 1992).

A More Comprehensive Approach

As I hope I have made clear, I couldn’t agree more with the way of thinking proposed by Weiss and Rupp, that is, a “full and focused appreciation of the individual at work.” But that appreciation should not be limited to the descriptive scientific research perspective. It should include a normative perspective regarding our views, as morally responsible and socially conscious I–O psychologists, of what the experience of work ought to (and ought not) be like and empathy for much of what workers in fact experience on the job. A few years ago I proposed “an expanded vision of I–O psychology that attempts to go beyond the limited letter of our espoused values to include a better representation of its spirit as well” (Lefkowitz, 2003, p. 281). I conclude by noting the four interrelated facets of that expanded vision.

An Expanded Values Model for I–O Psychology

I previously attempted to describe the distortions and deficiencies of the scientist–practitioner model and suggested creation of a scientist–practitioner–humanist model (Lefkowitz, 1990, 2003, 2005, 2008). Others have supported this perspective (e.g., Muchinsky, 2006), and a fledgling group of humanistically oriented work psychologists has demonstrated the roles we can play in areas such as poverty reduction (Carr, 2007; Carr, McWha, MacLachlan, & Furnham, 2010; Lefkowitz, 2010b). Arguably at the core of the humanistic perspective is the proposition that, in addition to the goal of improving organizational effectiveness, “a fundamental objective of research and practice in organizational psychology is to assure that organizations are safe, just, healthy, challenging, and fulfilling places in which to work” (Lefkowitz, 2010a, p. 297, emphasis in the original).

The Addition of a Normative Perspective

In our zest to be good scientists we strive mightily to be rigorous in our methods and interpretations. In our concern for enhancing organizational functioning, our professional practice is guided by questions such as “Is it a cost-effective solution to the client’s needs?” We less frequently challenge ourselves with normative questions like “Is this the right (or best, or most just) thing to be doing?” or “Is this the kind of company we ought to have?” I believe that one of the reasons we shy away from such involvement is the mistaken belief that in order to be good scientists we must maintain a “value-free” stance. Elsewhere, I have tried to explain why that belief is mistaken (e.g., Lefkowitz, 2003, 2008). More important, maintaining the value-free fiction has served to disguise the prevalence of an alternative value system that dominates our work—that of the economic business world.

Concern for the Individual Employee

This third facet of the proposed expanded vision most nearly overlaps with the concerns expressed by Weiss and Rupp. But there remains an important distinction between our positions even here. They assert that the organization-centric perspective reduces the worker “to a list of abstractions . . . identified and organized to facilitate the collective purposes of organizations . . . turn[ing] attention away from the people themselves . . . direct[ing] our attention away from the important human questions about work.” Yet, their criticism is essentially a scientific one having to do with how we define the content of I–O research. My criticisms include our lack of *concern* for the well-being of the individual worker as a consequence of our near-exclusive concern for the organization. (It may well be that our lack of appropriate understanding contributes to or exacerbates that lack of empathic concern.) Just one example from among the many that are possible. Reflect on the irony of roughly 25 years of voluminous I–O research concerning how to increase workers’ *organizational commitment* and *organizational citizenship behavior*—during which time the overwhelming fact of corporate life has been incessant downsizing.

Technical Competence and Societal Consequences

“Morality does not exist in a vacuum. Human pursuits should always be judged in terms of what their consequences are for other human beings” (Luria, 1976, p. 333). This is, or should be, an especially salient point for I–O psychologists because the business organizations in which we work and conduct research set the agendas for that practice and research in accordance with their own values and objectives. Thus they define the problems, hence to a great extent determine or at least delimit the likely consequences of our work. The preamble of the American Psychological Association’s (2002) ethical code indicates that we are to be committed to using the scientific and

professional knowledge we produce “to improve the condition of individuals, organizations, and society.” Note the use of *and*, not *or*. It is not the case that “one out of three ain’t bad.” Introducing the macro-level of societal consequences inevitably forces a consideration of the moral role played in society by the corporations within which we work. That is a topic obviously beyond the scope of this commentary!

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