The Pattern-Oriented Approach: A Framework for the Experience of Work

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Whenever researchers suggest a paradigm shift, their ideas will be considered “radical.” Another “radical” person approach has been slowly gaining acceptance in the field of industrial–organizational (I–O) psychology. The past decade has seen an increase in the use of pattern-oriented approaches to study a variety of work-related phenomena, including commitment (Sinclair, Tucker, Cullen, & Wright, 2005), leadership (O’Shea, Foti, Hauenstein, & Bycio, 2009), career development (Gustafson, 2000; Reitzle, Körner, & Vondracek, 2009), and retirement transitions (Wang, 2007). We share Weiss and Rupp’s (2011) view that a person-centric perspective is necessary in the field of I–O psychology. We believe their person-centric perspective of work psychology can benefit from taking advantage of the theoretical tenets and methodological contributions of the pattern-oriented approach.

The idea of person-oriented research was first put forward by Jack Block (1971) in order to understand personality and its development. It has since been expanded by Magnusson, Bergman, and colleagues (e.g., Bergman & Magnusson, 1997; Magnusson, 1988; von Eye & Bergman, 2003). It is a holistic, interactionist approach to studying individual development. According to this perspective, the individual can be understood only as a totality not as a sum of fragmented variables. The totality results from self-organization. It integrates events in various contexts, at various times, and at various levels of complexity in a way unique to the individual. In principle, each individual is unique. In addition, the development of each individual is unique (von Eye & Bergman, 2003).
Five Tenets of the Pattern-Oriented Approach

The pattern-oriented approach, as put forward by Bergman and Magnusson (1997), involves five tenets.

1. An individual’s behavior is systemically based and is thus influenced by many different factors. These range from the cellular to the cultural and can easily incorporate Weiss and Rupp’s notion of subjective experiences. Moreover, the pattern-oriented approach is concerned with individual behavior and how it operates or is influenced by the context in which the individual exists. In other words, the “person” in the environment is just as important as the person–environment interaction and the environment itself.

2. Within these different environments, human behavior is complex and complicated. Therefore, it is highly unlikely that any one piece of information will adequately describe the individual. Thus, for example, when we examine how people experience being bored at work, we need to examine multiple qualities simultaneously, such as lethargy, restlessness, being tired, and not being able to settle on one activity.

3. There is orderliness to systems, individuals, and the interactions that occur between individuals and between individuals and systems. Bergman and Magnusson (1997) have argued the interactions among multiple pieces of information occur at different ecological levels. This tenet relates to Weiss and Rupp’s characterization of the way work is experienced, and the ability to understand both 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. On the basis of this tenet we expect that, over time, for some individuals there will be constancy in the way work is experienced and for some there will be various types of change.

4. Because of this lawfulness and structure, the processes involved in individual development are also lawful, and they will always involve multiple factors that can be described as patterns or profiles. We can only understand the meaning of these multiple factors by studying the interactions among them.

5. There are not an infinite number of patterns or profiles that describe individuals in context. Because of orderliness and lawfulness, some patterns necessarily will occur more often than expected and some less often than expected. The pattern-oriented approach is interested in both the typical and the atypical patterns. The variable-oriented approach is most interested in the typical; hence, outliers in the data are often excised, scores across individuals are summed and averaged, and nonsignificant results are rarely reported in the literature.

The hallmark of pattern-oriented research is that variables in and of themselves have limited meaning (Bergman & Magnusson, 1997). It is the pattern or profiles of these variables examined vis-à-vis other profiles operating in the system that takes on meaning and begins to describe an individual. When we assume the relationships among variables are not uniform across all the values that a variable might take, we can develop profiles, patterns, or configurations that describe individuals not scores on the variables.
Other Benefits of the Pattern-Oriented Approach

If we incorporate what we know, both theoretically and empirically, from the pattern-oriented approach, we realize studying work from a person-centric view does not mean every person is idiosyncratic. There will be commonalities in either how the common occurrences of work “feel” or the qualities associated with conscious experiences, and these commonalities can be captured in profiles, patterns, or other non-linear configurations.

Another advantage of the pattern-oriented approach is that the environment is captured within the system. For example, over time, personality affects the manner in which an individual interacts with the environment, but the environment also affects personality development (Asendorpf & Wilpers, 1998). The direct effects of this exchange are difficult to separate and measure. However, research shows that groups of people sharing similar patterns of personality interact and engage with the environment in similar ways. Over time, then, individuals within a cluster are growing and adapting in a similar fashion. Longitudinal research supports this explanation of the relationship between person and environment by showing that clusters of people diverge over time, meaning people within a cluster will become more similar to one another over time and increasingly dissimilar to those outside their clusters (Magnusson, 1995).

We can relate this to the idea of affect spin in Weiss and Rupp’s article. People with different intentionality and focus of attention will experience the movement from affective state to affective state differently. Over time perhaps, individuals with similar intentionality and focus of attention will experience both the transition and variability of affect differently from others. Thus, the pattern-oriented approach provides the longitudinal framework necessary to incorporate the study of the affective experiences at work as a meaningful, continuous process.

Some Challenges and Limitations

There are numerous methodological approaches that can be used in pattern-oriented research. These methods differ with respect to which of the pattern-oriented tenets they can empirically test and which they must assume to be true (Sterba & Bauer, 2010). Pattern-based approaches do not need to be implemented with a descriptive categorical approach like cluster analysis. For instance, we also have the possibility of applying methods for studying nonlinear dynamical systems, such as latent growth curve modeling. In addition, finite mixture modeling-based approaches are becoming popular in many areas of psychology and behavioral research (Collins & Lanza, 2010). Refinements within this framework make it possible to condition one pattern of variables on a second pattern of variables. For example, it is possible to create patterns of individuals based on the way ongoing work experience is episodically structured and patterns of individuals based on the meaning (e.g., affect, judged importance, and informativeness) given to each episode, and compare them simultaneously (Bray, Lanza, & Collins, 2010).

Furthermore, it is important for researchers to understand both the possibilities and limitations of these methods in a person-oriented context, such as the results’ sensitivity to errors of measurement and the importance of a sufficient sample size. This, of course, depends on the specific situation and the method used, but for some ambitious analytical goals, the number of participants that are needed can be higher than in standard variable-oriented analyses and should be considered in the design of the research.

Final Thoughts

With the pattern-oriented approach, we already have made inroads in terms of an alternative direction for our field. Weiss and Rupp’s person-centric view with its focus on affect and subjective experiences differs from the content of the work-related phenomenon studied to date using
a pattern-oriented approach. However, the pattern-oriented approach is broad enough to incorporate subjective human experience guiding the choice of topics and is well developed enough methodologically, so this agenda can be studied rigorously and in a manner consistent with the history of our field.

References