RESPONSE

Envisioning a Person-Centric Work Psychology

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Abstract
We have structured our response around 3 rough categories of commentary themes: those that provided illustrations of existing person-centric research, those that provided novel ideas about extending the viewpoint to traditional research areas, and those that criticized our neglect of issues of morality and power differences. In our response, we clarify and reiterate our position as advocating a science of first-person work experience. In doing so, we differentiate our agenda from others labeled person-centric but not first-person experiential in the way we describe it. We also differentiate our position from a primary interest in worker treatment and well-being, except as part of work experience, and defend that difference.

To begin with, we want to thank the authors for their thoughtful commentaries. We had hoped that our essay would generate interesting and provocative responses, and this set of commentaries more than met our expectations. We think that the full package will provide for a stimulating discussion throughout our field.

As we reviewed the commentaries, we observed that they fell into three rather rough categories. There was a category of commentaries that pointed to existing person-centric approaches to work psychology, approaches that we believe vary quite a bit in the extent to which they illustrate our position. In this category we place the papers by Amabile and Kramer (2011), Liu, Zhan, and Wang (2011), Foti, Thompson, and Allgood (2011), George and Dane (2011), and Truxillo and Fraccaroli (2011). There was a set of commentaries that sought to take our ideas and apply them to traditional areas of industrial–organizational (I–O) research and practice in order to generate new, person-centric research questions and applications. In this category we place the papers written by Adler (2011), Allen and Poteet (2011), and Bergman (2011). There were two commentaries that disputed the possibility of a person-centric work psychology that did not take moral and political issues into account. Lefkowitz (2011) best exemplifies this category, although George and Dane discuss this issue. As we think these three categories usefully organize the commentaries, we use them to structure our response. Finally, Weathington’s (2011) commentary does not fall into any of the groupings and so we will respond to his comment separately. Of course, each of the commentaries

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raised multiple issues worthy of long
discussion, but space limitations require
us to be selective and brief in our own
comments.

The first category of papers discusses var-
i ous existing person-centric approaches. In
our judgment all the approaches are inter-
esting in their own right, but they vary
quite a bit in terms of how well they actu-
ally connect to the ideas we put for-
ward. Consequently, we thought it useful
to restate some of the key points of our
position, especially because this particu-
lar group of papers helped us see where
our own positions needed clarification or
further development.

Our argument is for a person-centric
work psychology, but what do we mean
by person-centric? As Lefkowitz (2011) cor-
rectly observes, and we discuss later, we
clearly do not mean more concern with
worker needs and well-being. Of course we
would never dispute the importance of such
concerns. Nor would we take issue with the
argument that such concerns are relatively
lacking in our field when compared to inter-
est in organizational effectiveness. But that
is not our thesis.

Our thesis is this. Man (woman) reaches
out to his work, man as subject, work as
object. The current paradigm treats workers
as objects and ignores the primacy of their
status as subjects. It measures their proper-
ties and develops theories about the asso-
ciation of those properties. For reasons that
need not be repeated, the current paradigm
is wanting when it comes to examining
the subjective nature of work experience,
with subjective meaning the personal, first-
person experience of working. It is wanting
when it comes to understanding the “lived-
through experience” of working, the “what
it is like” to work. Instead, we are advo-
cating for the study of the worker as an
active subject reaching out and connecting
to his or her work. From worker as object
to worker as subject is the change we want
to see.

We believe that the worker as object
approach flows from but is not equiva-
 lent to the collective purpose agenda that
characterizes much I–O research. A focus
on the collective purpose encourages treat-
ing people as objective components of
systems organized to meet that purpose.
At the same time, people can be studied
as objects even when objectives other than
the collective purpose are being met.

After reading the papers in the first cat-
egory, we think the Amabile and Kramer
(2011) commentary best captures the points
we were trying to make. Their research on
inner work life is fascinating and their dis-
cussion of the challenges of the research
program very instructive. They have raised
extremely important issues with regard
to building the science of person-centric
work psychology. Their question, “What
approaches might researchers take to ensure
that their work meets standards of rigor,
while fulfilling the aim of taking subjec-
tive science seriously?” is a challenge for
anyone taking up the call.

Like Amabile and Kramer, we do not see
this as a rhetorical question, drawn to sug-
gest its impossibility. No. We think there
can be a science of subjective experience.
In this regard, we think that the difference in
the way we phrase the challenge as “a sci-
ence of subjective experience” and the way
they phrase the challenge as “the aim of
taking subjective science seriously” raises
a key point in our argument (although we
suspect that Amabile and Kramer meant it
as we describe it). Our person-centric work
psychology takes the personal viewpoint as
the topic of inquiry but doesn’t restrict it to a
subjective methodology. We see neurophe-
nomenology and consciousness studies and
all types of serious scientists rising up to
the challenges presented by the study of
mind, and we think we can too. We are not
suggesting their methods will necessarily
translate into our issues, but these scien-
tists are not afraid of the challenge and nor
should we be. The prevailing paradigm is,
well, prevailing, and it will take time and
effort to accomplish new objectives.

At the same time, we think the usefulness
of the Amabile and Kramer commentary
will be minimized if readers focus on the
methods of their research. More important
from our perspective is their attempt to develop constructs and issues that reflect an active subject experiencing his or her work. In addition, as George and Dane remind us, that active subject brings quite a bit from his or her life in full to each work experience.

We would like to thank Truxillo and Fraccaroli (2011) for pointing out the differences between the U.S. and European traditions. We have also felt that the difference in the way our field is referred to is instructive, particularly given the resounding rejection by SIOP of including “work” in any renaming of the association. Consistent with our earlier point, not all the research they cite as demonstrating an interest in employee well-being is necessarily person-centric in the way we think about it, but a lot is. To their list we would add newer research being done in Europe on the momentary experience of engagement (Sonnenstag, Dormann, & Demerouti, 2010). Like Truxillo and Fraccaroli, we hope the continued internationalization of our field will encourage a more person-centric research agenda.

Foti et al. (2011) and Liu et al. (2011) agree with our call for more person-centric research and point to current research programs and methods that they believe already illustrate the approach. Liu et al. call attention to the research on occupational health psychology (OHP), and both Foti et al. and Liu et al. refer to the interesting work being done with pattern-oriented analysis that tries to capture human functioning in a more holistic way. As interesting as these literatures and approaches are, we are not convinced that they necessarily connect to the subjective stance we tried to articulate. OHP certainly has as its concern the well-being of the person, but as we said earlier, worker well-being is not the theme of our agenda. We observe that research in OHP can take a subjective experiential stance but can also look a lot like person-as-object research, even as it focuses on worker well-being.

The same thing can be said about pattern analysis. As Foti et al. cogently argue, pattern analysis can be a way of examining subjective experiences, and we encourage research that takes this direction. At the same time, pattern analysis can also simply be a way of organizing the “properties of people.” Pattern or configural analysis does not necessarily make that leap from worker as object to worker as subject.

Finally, as Foti et al. indicate, pattern analysis strives for a more holistic approach to human functioning at work and elsewhere. Of course we accept this goal, having stated that a person-centric work psychology is “a work psychology that preserves the integrity of the person.” Yet, we observe that to a great extent this problem of the unity of the person diminishes, even disappears, as we move toward the subjective stance. Experientially, there are never pieces of me. There is only me, the full, total, and coherent me. As we ask what it is like to work, we can examine whether there are components of experience, subjectively recognized as components, and if so what they are, but in all cases the self “having” the experience is subjectively whole and singular. Of course a person can describe herself as a collection of features if you ask her, but surely that’s never how she experiences herself.

With regard to our second category, we were thrilled by the many ways in which our commentators illustrated the deep research questions that are uncovered when one views some of our traditional I–O topics with a person-centric lens. For example, Allen and Poteet (2011) effectively describe how mentoring research to date has been largely influenced by the prevailing paradigm, and how, despite the advances in this area, it has neglected a deep analysis of how it feels to mentor and be mentored, “continuously, as it occurs, with all the potential emotional ups and downs that are a feature of any meaningful relationship.” Similarly, Bergman (2011) presents a stimulating essay that challenges the ways in which “agreement” has been studied within I–O psychology. The fact that this construct is measured as an aggregate of cross-sectional perceptions is a clear illustration of the prevailing paradigm’s influence on the objectification of workers.
Certainly the questions raised by a shift in focus to a study of the subjective experience of agreement could teach us even more about how individuals experience their work with one another.

Finally, Adler (2011) offers a number of questions that might be asked regarding the subjective experiences of job applicants. We truly appreciate Adler pointing out that I–O psychology has largely ignored the worker as an active sense maker and found his description of the construals, meanings, narratives, and emotions that are elicited in employees as they participate in our research intriguing and in need of much more direct discussion in the literature. We equally appreciate his discussion of a person-centric approach to preemployment assessment as these sorts of exercises are exactly what we need to break free from the prevailing paradigm and into an approach where we begin to more fundamentally understand the experience of working. At the same time, we would like to express to our readers that this collection of essays is just that—an exercise in articulating what a person-centric approach might look like, with an admission that this collection is in no way prescriptive. We need to go much, much further than this and hope that our collective thoughts will catalyze future discussion along this path.

We were also stimulated to hear a practitioner’s comments on our perspective and would have great interest in hearing more. Although our thesis is directed more at the study of workers than the practice of I–O psychology, we must acknowledge that HR practices influence the subjective experience of work. Our hope was that our practitioner colleagues would also see value in our arguments, in that the study of worker experience has the potential for uncovering a wealth of knowledge that might have great implications for practice. Adler provides a number of good examples of this.

Lefkowitz (2011) and George and Dane (2011) call attention to something we have left out, namely the moral or ethical treatment of workers in organizational settings. Lefkowitz states 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 issues.” George and Dane say “Thus, the collective purpose agenda is a political debate. Owners, shareholders, and top managers are powerful, and I–O psychology takes its cue from them …. .” In different ways both papers argue that our attempt to bracket the person-centric approach in a way that disregards moral and ethical issues is too limited.

In response, we simply do not see our agenda as being flawed or diminished by the absence of moral considerations. We think both papers made compelling arguments for their moral and political positions, but we did not see the arguments about an inability to take a person-centric position without including the perspective as compelling. The way a person is treated is certainly one way that person experiences work and thus has a place in the study of experience, but it can be studied as experience and without moral overtones. Ultimately, in response to Lefkowitz and George and Dane, we simply disagree with their implication that a person-centric work psychology must necessarily include moral issues of treatment, political inequalities, and so forth. Our interest is in the lived-through experience of work, and we stand by our assertion that this can be done scientifically and without infusion of values.

In addition, one of the things we wanted to emphasize in our original essay is that the research guided by the organization-centric paradigm need not be driven by any particular value system for any individual researcher working within it. On numerous occasions people have told us that while they study the variables traditionally studied in I–O (satisfaction, turnover, etc.), they do so with an interest in the people not the organization. We completely understand this and never meant to characterize I–O researchers as not being concerned with the well-being of people or not sympathetic to the consequences of power differences. At the same time we hold the position that
the paradigm itself has been driven by a particular set of interests (maybe values), and we, as a field, work with a set of constructs chosen for us years ago and for reasons we rarely reflect on. We believe a person-centric paradigm, starting fresh, will have new constructs and concepts and that will be more relevant to the people themselves.

A final commentary to which we would like to respond directly, which does not exactly fit into the categories we have used to organize our thoughts above, is that of Weathington (2011). We hoped that a methods expert would comment on our set of ideas and are therefore grateful to have this essay as part of the collection. Weathington begins by questioning our questioning of the usefulness of the collective purpose agenda that we feel characterizes the prevailing paradigm. He says “Without application … we are missing out on the fundamental goals and process of psychology as a science, specifically, the understanding of human behavior and the prediction of future behavior.”

We think this position greatly rests on the assumption that psychology is the study of behavior, an assumption that we believe is questionable. The history of psychology tells us that psychology cannot be defined as the study of behavior alone. Mind was our first definition. It is inherent in the derivation of the word. Behavior became our second definition, a definition prevalent in our most fallow period. The study of mind and behavior is more characteristic of any modern definition.

We would also suggest that a research agenda that sets as its goal some external outcome (i.e., the collective purpose of others, such as making organizations more effective or improving work conditions for employees) may sell short the very goal that Weathington extols (i.e., understanding human behavior). We call instead for research that brings the true experience of work back into focus, with the goal of understanding what work means, to working people, as they work. As we do this, we think our emphasis on subjective experience at work comes closer to a true definition of psychology.

In closing, we want to thank the authors who read our essay and then took the time to write such thoughtful commentaries. In our response we felt it appropriate to stick close to the commentaries and not treat this as an addendum to the initial paper. Still, any thoughtful reader will realize that there are many challenges ahead for the kind of person-centric, experiential work psychology we propose. There is a need for further conceptual discussion about the nature, even the possibility of, a science of subjective experience. There are questions about methods that meet the essential standards of rigor and replicability. The challenges of these and other questions are apparent but not insurmountable, and the payoff will be a richer work psychology than the current paradigm allows.

References


