



COMMENTARY

The role of work psychologists in the development of antiwork sentiments

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Antiwork sentiments express a deep dissatisfaction with the nature of organizational work to such an extent that it questions the value of work as a life experience (Alliger & McEachern, 2024). People develop antiwork sentiments, at least partially, as a function of their workplace experiences. Given that we, as work psychologists, play a pivotal role in creating workplace experiences, we should pay attention to the development of antiwork sentiments in any particular organization, or, indeed, in a society as a whole. After all, our central organizational responsibility consists of implementing and supporting processes to create effective workplaces not just for organizational leaders but for all involved. To the extent that workers develop antiwork sentiments, then we should hold ourselves accountable for such dissatisfaction given that it develops in the context of work processes (e.g., hiring, promotion, training, performance management, leadership, and teamwork) we help implement and support. In our commentary, we specifically focus on how the knowledge commonly generated by work psychologists contributes to the development of antiwork sentiments. In turn, we consider how work psychologists can advance their research investigations to generate knowledge to guide organizational practices that make work a worthwhile life experience after all.

As a basis for our arguments, we state that common research practices in work psychology violate a fundamental law of organizations: *The people make the place* (Schneider, 1987). The fundamental law consists of three key components that hold implications for effective research investigations, and ultimately, the organizational guidance we promote to impact how people experience their work. First, the fundamental law exponentiates organizational actors who create workplaces (Macy & Willer, 2002). The first component implies work psychologists should focus on understanding *particular people* as opposed to treating people as exchangeable sampling units. Second, the fundamental law states that organizational actors enact work processes in creating their workplaces (Mohr, 1982). The second component implies work psychologists should focus on understanding how people individually behave, think, and feel, and how they collectively motivate, collaborate, lead, and communicate. In brief, work psychologists should seek to understand *how people experience and operate in their workplaces*. Third, the fundamental law makes clear that people make a place (from the bottom on up); the place does not make people (from the top on down; Kozlowski et al., 2016). The third component implies work psychologists should focus on *how people* (inclusive of all organizational members from leaders to entry-level newcomers), by their actions, *maintain and uphold an extant place*, or, by their actions, *change and evolve a place from the bottom on up*. We argue that when work psychologists fail to follow the fundamental law in their research practices, then their resulting organizational guidance seeds antiwork sentiments.

Violations of the fundamental law bring clear and critical consequences. Namely, when we, as work psychologists, violate the three components of the fundamental law, we ignore the

particularities of the specific people that make a place. In ignoring people, we create organizational environments in which transactional relationships and goals reign. Under such transactional organizational environments, people fail to recognize each other as people and instead treat each other as cogs to achieve “bottom-line” goals. At that point, the promise of a workplace to satisfy the general needs people feel for purpose, achievement, autonomy, learning, and social relations no longer proves tenable (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Instead, people experience their work and workplace as things that steal their time, often nonconsensually, and, as a result, they miss an opportunity to fulfill their needs. Consequently, people develop antiwork sentiments from violations of the fundamental law.

We proceed by explicating how work psychologists violate each of the components of the fundamental law in their research practices and the implications those violations hold for the development of antiwork sentiments. Then, we discuss how work psychologists may advance their research practices to act in accordance with the fundamental law, and thereby, seed the development of enriching work experiences. Although work psychologists may readily recite the fundamental law, we do not commonly follow it in our research practices. Here, we encourage change to align our word with deed.

Research practices in violation of the fundamental law of organizations

The vast majority of the empirical literature generated by work psychologists ignores *particular people*, and thereby, it violates the first component of the fundamental law. Work psychologists tend to propose and analytically evaluate hypotheses focused on psychological construct relations *across* (i.e., aggregated over) people. If we review any of our academic journals that publish empirical research, then we notice that virtually all empirical hypotheses never reference people. Instead, our empirical hypotheses reference psychological constructs. We treat psychological constructs as the main actors on the “organizational stage.” Yet, psychological constructs do not “make” people; people “make” psychological constructs. By focusing on psychological constructs, we treat people as an afterthought who serve merely as exchangeable sampling units of observation from some (generally undefined) population. Indeed, when we analyze cross-sectional survey data with regression-based models to evaluate empirical hypotheses focused on relations of psychological constructs, we tend to incompletely interpret regression coefficients. A complete interpretation of regression coefficients would consist of statements such as this one: A one-scale unit difference between two populations of people on one construct implies a particular scale-unit difference between the same two populations of people on another construct. The complete interpretation makes clear the aggregation of people. Such hypotheses and empirical research do not speak to particular organizational actors (Macy & Willer, 2002). Instead, they speak to differences between populations (aggregates) of people. In other words, such research “loses” the protagonists of the fundamental law. If we advise organizational leaders to manage their people from such research, then we will offer them advice that serves the *nonexisting* “aggregate” person instead of the *particular people* that compose organizations. Consequently, if organizational leaders ignore their people by treating them as “aggregates,” then their people may reasonably develop antiwork sentiments.

Along the same lines, the vast majority of our empirical research literature ignores the study of *work processes*, and thereby, it violates the second component of the fundamental law. Our research literature commonly proposes explanations for input–output psychological construct relations by suggesting mediating psychological constructs that seemingly serve the role of processes. However, studying such chained psychological construct relations does not constitute the study of work processes enacted by organizational actors (Braun et al., 2022). Psychological constructs summarize (or aggregate) sets of behaviors, feelings, and/or thoughts. As a result, they ignore the particularities of how organizational actors experience and create their workplaces.

To actually study work processes, we must study the particularities of the lived experience of organizational actors. If organizational actors feel dissatisfied with their lived experiences in their workplaces, then we must study exactly what happens in their workplaces for such dissatisfaction to emerge. We note the qualitative difference between advising organizational leaders to augment their agreeability in order to establish trustful relationships with their people to eventually affect their people's satisfaction (i.e., offering advice via psychological construct mediation: agreeableness → trust → satisfaction) versus providing direct guidance on actions particular leaders may implement to develop trustful and satisfying relationships with particular people (i.e., process advice: consider how to dynamically relate with each person as dyadic collaborations unfold in the workplace). The former (psychological construct mediation) guidance reflects generally obvious, “post-hoc to action” advice whereas the latter (process) guidance reflects operational, “live in the action” advice. Consequently, if organizational leaders, on top of treating their people as aggregates, fail to consider how they themselves and their people operate in their workplaces, then their people may find all the more reasons to develop antiwork sentiments.

Lastly, the vast majority of our empirical research literature takes a *top-down, contextual* as opposed to a *bottom-up, emergent* approach to the study of people, and thereby, it violates the third component of the fundamental law. We do not merely imply the propensity of “multilevel” top-down as opposed to bottom-up research; we also imply that even “single-level” research takes a contextual as opposed to an emergent view on the study of people (Kozlowski et al., 2016). Organizations do not merely appear; they come into existence by the efforts of people. Furthermore, organizations do not maintain nor evolve themselves; people maintain and evolve organizations. Yes, organizational founders and leaders immensely influence the ongoings and “feel” of organizations, but they do so in a bottom-up as opposed to a top-down way. They, too, operate as people who make the place; the place does not make leaders nor any other organizational actors. Instead, “people make people” via direct (e.g., a leader tells subordinates what to do; colleagues assist each other on work) or indirect (e.g., organizational actors learn the cultural norms created and codified by others) influence. Importantly, any “codifications” (e.g., organizational structures, policies, norms, operations) that reflect a place come from people, and either the same or new people uphold or evolve those codifications. In other words, people *continuously*, in a *bottom-up* way (i.e., from their actions and interactions), make a place. By implication, top-down interventions (e.g., recomposing teams, offering performance bonuses) to address worker dissatisfaction may utterly fail as they miss the bottom-up nature of workplace happenings. Consequently, if organizational leaders only manage their people from the top on down, then their people may develop antiwork sentiments from the bottom on up.

Research practices in accordance with the fundamental law of organizations

To help people make enriching places, work psychologists must enact research practices in accordance with the fundamental law. Guided by the three components of the fundamental law, we must, in our research practices, (a) keep particular people, as opposed to aggregates of people, front and center; (b) consider and observe how particular people actually operate within periods of time; and (c) look to intervene with a bottom-up, as opposed to a top-down, perspective. In doing so, we may help people create and evolve their workplaces in such ways that their work actually provides worthwhile and fulfilling life experiences for them. To act in accordance with the fundamental law across its three components, we encourage work psychologists to embrace a general coaching mentality.

First, coaches familiarize themselves with their “players” by talking with them and observing them as they “practice and play games” (i.e., perform their work). In the typical organizational case, work psychologists should familiarize themselves with organizational actors by experiencing “days in their actors’ work lives” (Pentland, 1999). For small-scale investigations, techniques such

as intensively interviewing organizational actors and shadowing them on the job may work sufficiently well. For large-scale investigations, the rapid development and use of computer software applications to track work happenings in a less intrusive way facilitates an ever-expanding possibility to review who does what work at particular times and with whom (e.g., updates to documents, digital work records on projects or clients), communications between people (e.g., e-mail, messaging platforms), and how work happens (e.g., recordings of collaborative work meetings). With such process (i.e., “in the action”) data, work psychologists can “play back” what happened to better formulate what organizational actors could do moving forward. Undoubtedly, the tracking and use of such process data comes with risks. Most prominently, organizational leaders might think to use it for surveillance to “watch over” and control their people for their own purposes (e.g., “the bottom line”). Yet, surveillance violates the fundamental law in the form of attempting to rely on only top-down control (Thiel et al., 2022). The fundamental law implies that top-down control on its own, at some point, fails. In brief, people eventually may revolt. Thus, the analytical use of such data should look to better all people and not just the few “at the top.” Critically, such process data that “lives in the action” moves us beyond construct data that treats people as aggregates, and it allows work psychologists to directly speak to *particular people* to help them formulate how to make their work lives fulfilling.

Second, coaches consider how their “players” perform *during* particular periods of time (e.g., they analyze how “players” perform *during* “games”). In the typical organizational case, work psychologists should look to similarly identify relevant time periods for organizational actors. Natural time periods might include the duration of a work project (e.g., developing a product for the market) or simply a literal period of time (e.g., one month). Organizational actors enact processes *during/within* these time periods (Butts et al., 2023). Hence, the study of people *across* time periods (e.g., typical longitudinal empirical studies measuring psychological constructs across time) does not, by itself, constitute the study of how people enact processes. To study processes, we need to capture the action as it happens (e.g., unfolding team collaboration) as opposed to what emerged after the action was completed (e.g., dissatisfaction with team members over the last month). We must pay attention to exactly how people carry out their behaviors and communications, express their feelings, and relate to each other. By capturing the action, we get to the heart of how people make their workplaces.

Third, coaches focus on training and developing their “players.” Effective coaches consider the particularities of individuals and intervene with training programs dedicated to developing “players” from the bottom on up. Ultimately, effective coaches understand that the “players” before them must execute the “plays” instead of some imaginary “players” in coaches’ minds. Similarly, work psychologists should emphasize the development of people from the bottom on up so that they may better create an enriching work experience for themselves and others (Braun et al., 2022). In other words, the development of people should not focus on generic top-down interventions (e.g., set goals for the next period) but, instead, bottom-up interventions that detail the possible ways they might go about performing their work given the constraints of the forthcoming time. Such process development includes bottom-up interventions focused on interactions between people wherein work psychologists, as examples, may provide advice on the manner in which team members sequence and pass on their work between themselves, leaders deliver directives to subordinates, and colleagues support each other during intense and stressful times. With a commitment to developing people, work psychologists contribute to helping people create their workplaces from the bottom on up.

Conclusion

People may develop antiwork sentiments in the face of organizational policies violating the fundamental law of organizations. To help organizational actors develop effective policies, we, as

work psychologists, need to engage in research practices that focus on (a) particular people and their relations as opposed to psychological constructs and their relations, (b) how people enact work processes, and (c) the bottom-up development of people and everything they create. By doing so, we “live with the people” and, as a result, give ourselves a chance to help people make their workplaces enriching for all involved.

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