

Chapter 15

A Global Context: Future Goals of Work and Organizational Psychology and Demands of Civil Society

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Within the first century of its existence, work and organizational psychology made significant gains in both basic and applied research, in the development of products, and in the area of intervention models. These gains are, on the one hand, connected to the development of psychology—in particular, the growth of cognitive and social psychology—and, on the other hand, undoubtedly reflect technical, economic, cultural, and social evolution of specific countries as well as globally. Basic research, applied research, the development of products, and intervention models represent the central aims of work and organizational psychology's mission. More importantly, this mission will not undergo substantial variations in the future but, rather, will continue to move along this same line of continuity.

The birth of psychology, and thus, also that of work psychology was characterized by reductionism and simplification: first of all, as happened within other sciences, we may note the widespread use of clarifying dichotomies. The dichotomies physical-psychological, conscious-unconscious, organism-environment, cognition-emotion have not only encouraged theoretical reflection and sustained entire schools of thought, but they have also caused delays and obstacles for the advancement of knowledge. The theorization of antique dichotomies is not limited to the beginning of the last century. More recent dichotomies are: subjective versus objective, micro versus macro, quantitative versus qualitative. Today we can consider them outdated.

A series of transitions, which have moved from the dichotomy approach towards the search for connections and interdependence, constitute the greatest discontinuity. Let's look at two examples.

1) *From the individual to the context.* Originally, work and organizational psychology centered its interest on individual workers. Individuals were studied with respect to their diverse physical, sensory, psychomotor, and cognitive abilities. Much later, the discipline expanded to include the study of emotional experiences and of individual strategies to manage, in the face of diverse situations, emotions. Today, however, the

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notion that there are three levels of analysis for every type of phenomena or process is widely accepted: individual (biological/psychological/social), group, and organizational, considered in their relationship with relative contexts.

2) *From the uni-determination of phenomena to multidimensional analysis.* For a long time, theoretical and methodological options were oriented towards the identification of linear cause-effect relationships. It wasn't until the second half of the past century—thanks to the epistemological paradigm, “the complexity” (Weaver, 1948; Bateson, 1979; Morin, 1986)—that research moved away from the assumption that a strong interdependence between subject and object and observer and observed reality exists. The complexity defines what results from the connection of many parts or elements and leads back to the plurality of relations that exist between the elements which compose the object, between the object and the environment, and between the observed and the observer; thus, the complexity of problems and multidimensional and interconnected realities. This discontinuity has even profoundly changed research themes; one only need look at how we define organizational health. In just the last ten years an important and valuable shift from the protection of individuals' physical health and accident prevention to the evaluation of psychosocial risks has occurred.

This discontinuity has also transformed the work psychologist's professional role from one of work analyst to that of an analyst of complexity. For the first work and organizational psychologists—*work analysts*—the object of central interest and research was work per se. Overall, its external, physical and structural characteristics were studied. Methods of intervention and transformation were a focus for motives of efficiency and improving individual's adaptation; essentially, researchers sought to increase rational productivity. For current work and organizational psychologists—*complexity analysts*—the central focus of research is the relationship that individuals, groups, and organizations entertain with relative contexts in order to explain the growth and decline processes of individuals and systems. To position oneself between continuity and discontinuity is one of the problems of existence; to choose the boundary between maintenance and innovation, conservation and creation, is the essence of every intentionally identified and pursued change. As a result, in order to highlight potential new developments in work and organizational psychology, we need to identify the areas of continuity and discontinuity for further investigation. However, we don't need to preoccupy ourselves with continuity. Accredited scientific journals will take care of that. The power groups that manage these journals have created a healthy competition between researchers and maintain an important function as preliminary verifiers of scientific contributions. At the same time, however, they have also become instruments of knowledge validation, which often leave only modest space for theoretical and methodological innovation.

Thus, we need to work more on discontinuity. The term discontinuity indicates, in its most common sense, a break in continuity, the abandonment of the established order; the research of methodological paths not yet fully explored. Discontinuity may represent an interruption in time or space. It may also imply a different way of conceptualizing known problems or reversing the connections of cause and effects

or even the priority given to the levels of analysis. Here's an example. Research in the psychology of work and organization has primary importance on the individual's needs and, subsequently, organizational needs. A strong element of discontinuity would be to change the focus, concentrating on the demands of civil society. These are the main requirements that emerge from a certain political, economic and cultural demand; instances that inspire, influence and change the harmonious coexistence among individuals and groups in society. The demands of civil society influence the life, development and decline of organizations. I realize that societal requests are often confused, contradictory and variable, depending on geographical and cultural contexts. Nonetheless, I feel it is possible to identify instances that relate to diverse cultures and are pertinent to both local and global contexts. I will limit myself to highlighting only two examples.

1) *Efficacy and coherence*. Individuals, groups, and organizations need and require more efficacy to manage the entire network of relationships and contexts with which they interact. For instance, young adults in search of a job or older adults who become unemployed need to improve their efficacy in dealing with the work market and to successfully plan their futures. Even organizations claim to pursue efficacy but appear more interested in efficiency in order to realize immediate economic outcomes. The world of politics and economics appear to be insensitive to the requests of efficacy originating from civil society. The big financial scandals, which have destroyed the savings of many people, are not entirely explained by management's corruption but go back to the profound transformation of many industrial companies into financial associations, the deregulation of financial markets, and the inefficacy of international institutes' control mechanisms. If shared, these matters have consequences for the potential variables to study. In the past, we widened the scope of variables worthy of consideration: from the individual to the group; from the group to the organization. In the future, we need to study the interactions between organizations and society, the relationship between organizations and political and economic power and their interconnections. An enormous ecological disaster—the black sea in the Gulf of Mexico—is certainly not the result of an unforeseen technical error but, rather, seems to be the consequence of incoherent organizational practices with respect to protection of the environment, lack of moral commitment on the part of management and/or the entire organization, and absence of control on the part of the diverse organisms that at both local and international levels should preserve the use of the planet's natural resources.

2) *Transparency and ethics* These considerations go back to the social responsibility of organizations and are in line with civil society's second request: in organizational affairs and practices. The call for transparency is considered in numerous cultural contexts, not only as a simple ethical option but also a condition to guarantee coexistence within organizations and society and to realize higher levels of cultural integration and global civility. A precise connection between an organization's political choices, economic strategies, and organizational practices exists. This connection manifests itself in four themes:

- a) the protection of the environment;
- b) the promotion of security, safety, health and well-being;
- c) the diffusion and growth of knowledge and competences;
- d) equity with respect to the possibility of accessing resources.

These four areas—environment, health, knowledge and equity—already noted in the literature, can be innovatively investigated by inverting the priority given to levels of analysis: not individual, group, organization, society but rather, society, organization, group, individual. This is the discontinuity on which we should focus. Although we are not used to studying the influence of politics and economics on organizational choices, it seems naïve to exclude these variables just because they may be difficult to identify and isolate. A potential empirical course of action in this direction could involve the following four phases:

- a) study of civil society requests. The first empirical findings confirm that such requests revolve around the four identified areas: environment, health, knowledge and equity, which are defined in relation to diverse contexts;
- b) examination of normative contexts with the aim of identifying areas of responsibility, restrictions, control systems, etc.;
- c) identification of the strategies and tactics through which society's requests have been in part or completely evaded;
- d) definition of the conditions which render organizations capable of becoming environments of efficiency, development and civilization.

Although you all may not agree with this approach, I do believe that no one can sidestep the importance of the relationship between continuity and discontinuity in defining new objectives for work and organizational psychology. The role of discontinuity in research is crucial given that today organizations are profoundly different from how we understood and studied them in the past. We need to avoid becoming “research bureaucrats”, able to guarantee respect for formal rules and methods but incapable of explaining the string of connections which, along the line of society, organization, group, individual, dictate the rules of our future coexistence.

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