What about the Workers?

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When you think about the direction in which you would like to see occupational health psychology (OHP) move over the next ten years, what do you picture? For your consideration, I offer my answer to this question in this article.

Writing as an academic specializing in mental rather than physical health, I am often troubled by what I see as the one-sided nature of our discipline. As I see it, in my specialty area, emphasis is excessively placed on the environment; almost never on the individual. The individual is studied as the recipient of inputs from the environment, and we devote a lot of attention to his or her reactions to that environment, examining strain, burnout and occasionally happiness. However, despite the frequency with which these variables are studied as reactions, our investigations rarely explore the mental processes that contribute to them. My view is that placing mental processes, as opposed to job content, at the heart of our research and practice is an important goal for OHP over the next ten years.

Person-Centered and Environment-Centered Models

Wait— you might say— OHP's core values already emphasize the individual as well as the environment. For example, according to the NEOSH website (http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/oshp/oshp.html), "OHP concerns the application of psychology to improving the quality of work life, and to protecting and promoting the safety, health and well-being of workers." Both "intervention in the work environment" and "individual-level interventions to equip workers with knowledge and resources" are envisaged. However, NEOSH also tells us that "its 'proposed definition places priority on health protection,' which 'refers to intervention in the work environment to reduce worker exposures to workplace hazards.' It appears to me that it is the environment that receives most of our attention.

The Society for Occupational Health Psychology (http://sohp.gov.worm.edu/Field.htm) also acknowledges "individual psychological attributes." However, this acknowledgement seems to refer to traits and abilities rather than real-time processes more prominent in the Society's account are environmental features such as 'job content and work organization, organizational policies and practices, and the economic and political environments in which organizations function.' Generally, the OHP research literature overwhelmingly examines features of jobs and organizations; workers' mental processes (rather than their reactions) are rarely mentioned.

In that way, the relevant Wikipedia entry about OHP (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Occupational_health_psychology) indicates that the field is "concerned with the psychosocial characteristics of work places that contribute to the development of health-related problems in people who work." Fair enough, but what about the workers?

We Need to Change the One-Sidedness

Perhaps you agree with me that, despite some formal mentions, research in OHP is excessively directed at job content and organizational features at the expense of considering processes within the worker. Perhaps you don't. Either way, this is an important issue for OHP, and I ask you to consider it further.

The broader discipline of industrial-organizational psychology developed through interaction with organizational managers who provide funds and research access with the goal of improving organizational effectiveness. To that end, managers largely wish to adjust job conditions. Apart from person-centered procedures in staff selection and training, psychologists working in organizations are usually required to examine job content and to "psychoanalyze" employees. Managers and workers alike consider thoughts and emotions as people's own business and not open to external inquiry. On the other hand, reviewing and changing job content can be a relatively easy and sometimes effective way of "doing something" to help organizations.

In contrast to studying job content, it is very difficult to study mental processes: philosophical, methodological, and conceptual uncertainties abound. However, let's recognize the major limiting or enhancing importance of social norms—perhaps describable as "fashions." The shift toward behaviorism, for instance, came and went partly as a result of changes in wider academic trends. Academic psychologists' fashions at present exacessily favor looking at situations rather than at people. Some change is surely desirable.

The academic emphasis on environmental features reflects a wider societal outlook in recent decades. Commentators often refer to any hint that a person in difficulty is being "blamed," preferring instead to consider person a "victim" of circumstances. This "don't blame the victim" culture has often been associated with socially approved views that negative feelings arise because of the world rather than from something in the person. Accordingly, much more attention is paid to what is wrong in the environment than to the possibility that happiness, unhappiness, and mental health derive from the joint operation of personal and environmental processes. "Joint operation" is of course generally recognized by the OHP profession; my point is that it is rarely examined. In other words, the "assumed theory" and the "theory in use" do not coincide.

Thoughts that Matter

How can researchers and practitioners in OHP find ways to combine environment- and person-centered perspectives, research methods, and interventions? For studying the environment itself, several theories and empirical studies have been published. For example, my own "vitamin model" specifies the 12 primary environmental features and their modes of operation—like chemical vitamins that are beneficial for health only up to a point but sometimes harmful in large doses. For progress in person-centered theorizing, we need to define and investigate the main ways that thought processes contribute to the interpretation of incoming stimuli, incorporating those themes into our environment-centered models.

I've long appreciated the lines of English poet William Cowper, written in 1782:

"Much more attention is paid to what is wrong in the environment than to the possibility that happiness, unhappiness, and mental health derive from the joint operation of personal and environmental processes."

Happiness depends, as Nature shows,

Less on exterior things than most suppose.

Psychological health is undoubtedly rooted in environmental features, but also crucial are... (continued on page 9)
(continued from page 8) ... mental comparisons and thoughts. In particular we need to consider thoughts about:

- what other people have got
- what else might have happened
- what you expected
- how effective you think you've been
- your direction of progress
- what you are used to
- how important something is to you.

In recent years, I've developed an initial framework of those thought processes and the way they operate, particularly in job settings. Here is an outline:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Thoughts affecting your feelings</th>
<th>Questions you might ask yourself</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Comparisons with other people</td>
<td>&quot;Are others better-off or worse-off?&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Comparisons with alternative situations</td>
<td>&quot;How else could things have developed?&quot;</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Comparisons with what you expected</td>
<td>&quot;Has this turned out as I thought it would?&quot;</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Assessments of your own effectiveness</td>
<td>&quot;Am I handling this well?&quot;</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Comparisons with a desirable trend</td>
<td>&quot;How are things going? Getting better, worse, or...&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Assessments of novelty or familiarity</td>
<td>&quot;Is the situation unusual or is it familiar?&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Importance of an environmental feature</td>
<td>&quot;How personally important are these parts of (e.g.) my...&quot;</td>
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Academic research, mainly outside organisations, has addressed several of these judgments, but more research is needed. We might start by developing self-report measures of the seven themes in particular kinds of job setting, and routinely incorporate them into job stress research. Observed correlations between environmental features and mental health indicators are often only moderate, and it seems clear from personal observation and initial research findings that variations in interpretative processes affect the magnitude of those correlations; job features can have different meanings for different people.

We need to learn about the prevalence of each type of judgment in different settings, their correlates (e.g., local norms, personality traits, age, and gender), and their consequences in terms of mental and physical health. This framework of judgments also offers much scope for interventions along the lines of experiments carried out by cognitive-behavior therapists and positive psychologists. Different forms of mental exercise to block specific negative thoughts are effective in non-work settings, but organizational applications remain rare.

The seventh within-person feature, which reflects personal values, is perhaps the one most investigated in job settings to date. Evidence is accumulating that, for instance, jobcontent preferences strongly determine reactions to particular job features. To understand jobs and mental health, we surely need, at the very least, to incorporate job-related value measurement into our investigations.

**What Now?**

If some of these themes interest you, a few comments (negative, positive, or both) could generate discussion on the OHP Listserv (http://ohp.psy.uconn.edu/OHP-listserv.htm). Or a longer presentation might be possible in the Newsletter. In particular, however, you might like to try doing something along the lines suggested: actions speak louder than words!


**References**

