

**The Story of This Special Issue on Critical Perspectives in Work and Organizational
Psychology**

**Editorial Introduction to the Special Issue on ‘Critical Perspectives in Work and
Organizational Psychology’ to be published in Applied Psychology: an International
Review.**

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Abstract

In this editorial, we tell the story of how the Special Issue on Critical Perspectives in Work and Organizational Psychology (CWOP) came about, how it fits within the broader agenda of building a critical community within Work and Organizational Psychology, and how future research and thought may be inspired by the collection of critical papers related to work and organizational psychology. We introduce the term ‘criticalizing’ as a key concept in how the Special Issue was developed by the editorial team and the authors. Criticalizing moves beyond fixed static notions of ‘critical’ scholarship towards a process of engaging in more fluid, expansive and creative perspectives on the scholarship within work and organizational psychology. We illustrate how the set of papers within the Special Issue engages in such criticalizing of the field and offer new ways of thinking about and researching relevant topics in work and organizational psychology.

Keywords: Critical Work and Organizational Psychology, criticalizing, editorial, ideology.

Introduction

Two threads entwine throughout the origin story of this Special Issue: Our personal stories of wanting to conduct work and organizational psychology research in different ways, and our shared story of building a community in pursuit of that goal. Many of us who research in work and organizational psychology desire alternative ways to think about and conduct our scholarship and practice. We want our work to contribute to the public good and to be personally and socially meaningful, to experiment with diverse methodologies, and to expand the range of people and topics that receive our attention. Reaching our desired impact has been challenging, as our research involves diverse geographical and paradigmatic influences, reflecting perspectives from the Global North and Global South and invoking multiple theoretical traditions. In some moments, such work has reached broad audiences, but it rests on the margins of the work and organizational psychology field. Scattered across different academic milieux and traditions, we have struggled to build on our collective concerns; critical research in work and organizational psychology research has often been a lonely endeavor, particularly in Europe, although less so in other contexts, such as Brazil, that have more established critical traditions.

Several of us who wanted to explore CWOP connected to each other through conversations that occurred at the 2019 EAWOP (European Association of Work and Organizational Psychology) conference in Torino, Italy. At this event, the FOWOP (Future of Work and Organizational Psychology; www.futureofwop.com) network organized a workshop on how CWOP might influence teaching, research, practice and policy. In addition, at a panel discussion on the main program, four speakers (including members of the current Special Issue Editorial Team) discussed why, how and what critical perspectives can offer the field. There was a strong sense that work and organizational psychologists have more to contribute to contemporary grand societal debates, such as destructive capitalism and its role

in degrading decent, dignified and meaningful work; postcolonialism, neocolonialism, Global North-Global South divide and the dominance of WEIRD [Western, educated, industrialized, rich and democratic] societies in the production of psychological knowledge; staggering wealth and income inequalities; persistent social discrimination (e.g., sexism, racism, fundamentalism, heteronormativity, etc.), threats to world peace (including terrorism and war and their consequences of displacement and refugees), and climate change and environmental devastation. Each of these social issues shapes workers' lived realities; each is both political and personal.

Our discussion also revealed a shared desire for more diverse methodologies and pluralist perspectives on the purposes and practices of work and organizational psychology as a discipline (see also Bal & Dóci, 2018; D'Cruz & Noronha, 2018, 2021; D'Cruz et al, 2018; 2022a; Islam & Zyphur, 2006, 2009; Noronha & D'Cruz, 2017; Parker, 2007; Prilleltensky & Stead, 2013; Weber et al., 2020). We wanted to ask the big questions that are foundational to our field of inquiry: Who does work psychology exist for? What is our purpose in academia and in society? How can we engage more deeply with the root causes of problems in organizational and working life? What is to be gained by challenging and diversifying our assumptions about the field?

Since then, global events have led us to believe that a pluralistic approach to scholarship and practice in work and organizational psychology is more relevant than ever. These include the populist post-truth political backlash against progressive change such as environmentalism and sustainability; social equality and inclusiveness including #Metoo, Black Lives Matter and other movements addressing the marginalization of, for instance, indigenous (e.g., First Nations peoples) and lower caste (e.g., Dalits) groups, and secularism; and the devastating impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, all of which have placed a question mark on how work will be organized and experienced in the future.

Promoting Critical Perspectives

In pursuit of answers to these big questions, a multilayered discussion around CWOP began to develop across diverse platforms to promote debate on what CWOP could offer to the field.

One element of this work has been the creation of this Special Issue. In keeping with the open and reflexive spirit of critique, we wanted our initiative to be the continuation, not the culmination, of an ongoing discussion.

After having formed an initial editorial team of scholars interested in CWOP, we approached *Applied Psychology: An International Review*, who welcomed our suggestions. In our Call for Papers, we emphasized our vision of what CWOP stands for as an academic endeavor, such as exposing hidden ideologies in scholarly work, amplifying minority or marginalized voices in the field, and emphasizing reflexivity, impact-focus, and the development of alternative ideas. CWOP's goals are emancipatory and emphasize democratic decision making, and we believed that the editorial process *itself* should reflect those values. We discussed how to best practice fairness, diversity, and relationality in our editorial work. As in all such efforts, we succeeded only in part. For example, by editing an Special Issue in a journal owned by a large commercial publishing house, we were sensitive to our position within the neoliberalization of academic publishing, and we remain critically aware of the cost and accessibility issues faced by the readership of these very words. Positioning ourselves, our work and our ideals within this system involved replicating the competitive rituals of contemporary academic publishing. Given the restricted space in the Special Issue, we struggled over how to reject papers despite their potential, thereby *excluding* work from one of the moments in CWOP's history. We debated how we could justify such decisions and questioned our own role as editors to decide what critical work and organizational psychology is and what it is not. Such debates ran along the course of the Special Issue, in our attempts to

design a fair and reasonable editorial process. We also explicitly promoted the Special Issue Call for Papers across the globe and all levels of academia including doctoral scholars, early-career and established academics, offering multiple formats for publication that went beyond the usual 40-page double-spaced full-length academic article. This diversity of background and geography is reflected in the composition of our editorial team and our reviewer base.

Most of all, we broached the broader question of how to ‘humanize’ the (often quite harsh and dehumanizing) publication process. In response, we organized and collaboratively conducted two Paper Development Workshops to listen and provide constructive feedback to aspiring authors. These served as fora for building a CWOP community and we de-emphasized competition between papers. By trying to expand our scholarly community beyond editors and accepted authors, we tried to send a message of inclusiveness, that our work should be for the greater benefit. In a similar vein, we gratefully acknowledge the unpaid and generous work of reviewers, peer mentors and the many discussions leading to the final Special Issue. The workshops helped authors to develop their work as some of the doctoral and early-career academics had little experience publishing in internationally recognized academic journals. They were organized in such a way that they were accessible to people from across the world (i.e., by organizing them at different times in the day to allow for people from different time zones to participate), yet manuscripts were also welcomed to the Special Issue that were not submitted to the workshops.

Ultimately, the Special Issue’s value inheres in its ability to grow a community of scholars and academics interested in critical approaches to individuals and groups in the workplace and in empowerment and emancipation. We wished to highlight the role we hope to play in society as work and organizational psychologists, not by reifying individualism and instrumentalism (Bal & Dóci, 2018), but by questioning the hegemonic structures that systemically impede human dignity (Noronha et al., 2022). This dignity can be respected and

valued by giving voice to underprivileged individuals and groups in workplaces, catalyzing both their own agency and the support of other actors including ourselves (D’Cruz & Noronha, 2018; D’Cruz et al 2022a). We believe that achieving these ends requires that we critically examine peoples’ lived experiences and the meaning they give to important events in their lives, while sensitizing ourselves to the significant challenges that most people face globally to make a living for themselves and their loved ones.

Pressing Issues for CWOP

The Special Issue provided ongoing occasions for the editorial team to discuss its purposes and goals. Rather than an end point of writing and editing submissions, we saw this process as an important step in communicating the potential of CWOP, how it could be done and what it looks like to critically investigate work and organizational psychology-related topics. We are aware of how much more work must be done to progress toward our emancipatory and critical goals, beyond this Special Issue. During the process, we wrestled with the scope and definition of CWOP, recognizing the term as complex, emerging, and contested (Islam & Sanderson, 2021; Islam & Zyphur, 2006, 2009; McDonald & Bubna-Litic, 2012, 2017; Prilleltensky & Stead, 2013; Weber et al., 2020). Yet critical theorizing and perspectives involve specific conceptual and intellectual histories, and we wished to preserve the intellectual integrity of these even as we promoted plurality. We reflected on the importance of context (e.g., D’Cruz et al, 2022b): critical priorities shift across history and geography, even as they show family resemblances, so we awaited new expressions of criticality and were ready to think through their intersections and fault lines. Concerned with inclusivity yet wary of co-optation, we questioned how we would know if a submission was critical *enough* for inclusion in a CWOP-focused Special Issue. For instance, how to assess critical examination of leadership that illuminates the concept’s hidden assumptions yet fails to

question the exploitative model of employee instrumentalization? How to assess a study that is critical of gender or racial inequality but fails to acknowledge the historicity, hybridity, and contested nature of its core concepts? How to evaluate research that is *thematically* critical yet *methodologically* “mainstream”, or vice-versa? Such are debates and decisions without a final answer and where the pluralism of CWOP itself is challenged. It is also the space where narratives can begin to be reconfigured and rewritten.

In response, the editorial team began to use the term ‘criticalizing’, to differentiate between critical as a fixed state or entity, and criticalizing as an ongoing process in which aspects of criticality emerge at various points of research. Rather than asking whether a paper or project is critical *enough*, we began to ask how and where it criticalizes, and with what consequences. Notably, “criticalizing” is verb-like, thus representing the dynamic and evolving nature of our critical project. Rather than something done *upon* an idea or object (i.e., to critique *something*), it is something done relationally and with an eye toward transformation. It involves developing an understanding of the power structures and ideological assumptions underpinning our work, the values that drive it and the practices through which we can conduct our research and practice in a more meaningful way for ourselves and others. These assumptions, values, and practices require critical examination in terms of their intentions and potential effects, seeking to extend the contributions of our research and teaching to make greater positive contributions to society in and beyond the university. Criticalizing, thus, presupposes but also transcends more passive notions of “criticizing”. Rather, it may contribute towards realizing and restoring human dignity and welfare across the globe through equality and respect, with the goal of peaceful coexistence between humans and nature. Its ambitions are ethical, compassionate, responsible, and sustainable well-being whose scope encompasses people and the planet.

We see the current Special Issue as a journey of criticalizing, that is, to approach existing theorization, concepts, and practices in a more critical manner. Rather than asking of every paper whether it was critical *enough*, we asked if, and in what ways, a paper criticalized the sub-field that it addressed. This allowed us to recognize the multiple axes along which work might be criticalized, such as methodology, ideology, theory, or the topic or group of focus (e.g., Islam & Sanderson, 2021).

A related issue, drawing intense discussion among the editorial team, involved the most appropriate or effective strategies for criticalizing work and organizational psychology, ranging from more radical approaches of antagonistic opposition to and resistance against the ‘mainstream’ to more moderate and pragmatic forms of reform-oriented complementarity. Although it would be beyond this editorial to reiterate this discussion, let alone to suggest a solution to the issue, the heterogeneity and diversity of the included contributions illustrates a plurality of approaches to being critical and criticalizing extant research in work and organizational psychology and the ‘movement dynamism’ that can emerge from the methodological, ideological, and thematic range of criticalizing tendencies.

The editorial team’s conversations and reflections led us to see the Special Issue as a dynamic process and to seek to avoid a binary distinction between the ‘mainstream’ and CWOP. We see these as moments in the overall development of work and organizational psychology, and not as camps in a paradigmatic struggle nor as adversaries in a winner-take-all battle. The tension between CWOP and work and organizational psychology at large is a scholarly one, and in the spirit of scholarship, it is better acknowledged than disavowed. Both in dialogue with ‘mainstream’ scholarship and acknowledging foundational differences, we reject the idea that we represent two different fields or communities and see ourselves as engaging with, rather than pulling away from, the wider work and organizational psychology community. Reflexivity demands self-questioning, and we consider CWOP as playing this

role, in a process of criticalizing our own work and traditions to help move the field forward. Many of the Special Issue editors have had careers deeply invested in what could be considered the ‘mainstream’, moving to more critical perspectives at what seems to be a moment of inflection in our social and political history. In moments of deep crisis, not the least a crisis of work, work and organizational psychology must reflect upon itself and reconsider its aims and practices. In some cases, this may involve reinforcing the core values of science as normally practiced: reliability, objectivity, and rational distance. In others, it requires taking the risk to be involved personally, emotionally, and collectively in the problems we wish to understand and address. Which forms of intellectual activity to deploy at which social and historical moments are the contents of situated academic judgments; judgments best made collectively and with care toward those we study and with whom we dialogue.

In other words, we as an editorial team engaged in a process of criticalizing our own work and thought, and it is precisely this which we want to achieve with the Special Issue: that when introduced to the various contributions in the Special Issue, our colleagues in the field feel invited to criticalize their own, others’ and our (i.e., the editors’) work, research, teaching, and contributions within educational settings, universities and the field.

The final set of papers that constitutes the Special Issue on CWOP represents such a collective process of criticalizing: jointly they interrogate the ideological underpinnings of the field and draw attention to the lesser understood and acknowledged aspects of the psychology of work, including the psychology of inequality, instrumentality and vulnerability of contemporary work. By way of introducing the articles that make up the Special Issue we would like to briefly note how we did on some of our aims. The lead authors of the articles include doctoral students and early career researchers, suggesting that CWOP reflects the interests and perspectives of those who may shape the field in the future. The lead authors

represent five different countries including Austria, Vietnam, the United States (2), Germany and The Netherlands (these are based on the universities where they are currently employed). Nevertheless, where we need to improve is to grow the number of scholars from the Global South. Several authors from the Global South attended the paper development workshops; however, they either did not submit a paper to the Special Issue or made it through the review process. Another issue that we encountered – and this seems to be a perennial problem of critical theoretical scholarship in general - is that the Special Issue contains only one empirical paper, which meant the opportunity to showcase the value of interpretative, constructivist and transformative methodologies was not realized to the degree we would have wished.

The Special Issue

The Special Issue comprises seven contributions to CWOP. Jointly they discuss the foundations of what CWOP is, has been and could be, while illustrating how more critical perspectives may shed new insights into existing theory and concepts in work and organizational psychology. Moreover, they also illustrate empirically how work and organizational psychology research can be conducted in alternative and meaningful ways, thereby overcoming the limitations of a purely positivistic, quantitative-oriented work and organizational psychology.

The first contribution, by Nathan Gerard, focuses on the contemporary meaning of Baritz's 1960s classic 'The Servants of Power' to understand the state of contemporary work and organizational psychology and the potential for critical thought within it. Gerard's contribution serves as the perfect opening for the Special Issue, as he draws attention to the two-fold dangers that CWOP faces. The first is that critical work psychologists may fall into the trap of becoming entangled in the institutionalized regimes of scholarly work while failing

to resist the actual structural forces that degrade the conditions of work in society. Secondly, we may inadvertently position ourselves as intellectually elitist by maintaining a critical distance from ‘mainstream’ scholarship and the practice of work itself.

In the subsequent contribution, by Tim Newton, Ruxandra Monica Luca, Natasha Slutskaya and Annilee Game, the history of psychology is further interrogated, claiming that history has become largely absent in work psychology. According to the authors, this has caused a ‘narrow sense of self’, a decontextualized perspective on the individual at work. The current imperative for change, however, also necessitates a better understanding of the neoliberal academic context in which work and organizational psychology knowledge is produced, and the authors convincingly argue that the rise of critical thought in work and organizational psychology is dependent upon the academic system in which scholarship is conducted.

Edina Dóci, Lena Knappert, Sanne Nijs, and Joeri Hofmans provide the first fully-developed illustration in this Special Issue of how criticalizing may unfold in practice. Turning attention to the hugely popular notion of psychological capital, or ‘PsyCap’, the authors argue and show how this concept, being firmly rooted in positive psychology, is structurally unequal. Through its exclusionary interpretation, PsyCap has become a concept that serves a neoliberal agenda, further accentuating existing inequalities in the workplace. By a range of psychological mechanisms, PsyCap is reinforced through hegemonic, status-quo driven structures. Overall, Dóci et al. show how critical perspectives can turn existing concepts in work and organizational psychology upside down, providing radically new understandings that problematize the uncritical use of concepts such as ‘psychological capital’.

Franziska Kößler, Jenny Wesche, and Annetkatrin Hoppe follow up the Dóci et al. paper and explore the impact of inequalities at work. Given the implicit understanding in

much work and organizational psychology research of the ‘agentic individual’, Kößler et al. problematize such a notion and show how, for many people, this assumption does not hold. Exploring the so-called employment-health dilemma, or the choice for individuals between work while risking their health, the authors develop a model of how to better understand the context which determines choices between employment at the risk of one’s health or rejection of work for the protection of one’s health.

Next, Andrea Bazzoli and Tahira Probst’s contribution explores the topic of job insecurity, showing how a phenomenon that has been heavily researched in work and organizational psychology may benefit from the insight generated by critical perspectives. This contribution employs a method of “meta-synthesis”, aggregating and interpreting primary studies to problematize literature, propose broad interpretations across a field and facilitate policy formulation. Drawing attention to the experiences of vulnerable groups of workers, the authors highlight how job insecurity may have different meanings and consequences for different people, such as for migrant workers, whose ability to stay in their country of employment may be threatened. This paper dialogues well with Lisa Seubert, Ishbel McWha-Hermann and Christian Seubert, who also engage in a critical examination of work by examining the nature of precarious employment. Demonstrating a different approach to criticalization, the authors unpack the concepts of critical reflexivity and critical reflection as continuous processes that can increase the self-awareness, inclusivity, and potentially even the impact, of work and organizational psychology. They illustrate the value of these practices by situating precarious employment in its historical, economic, political, societal, cultural, and personal contexts, showing how these forces shape both the experience of precarity and the knowledge that has been created about this topic through psychological research to date.

The final paper by Lan Nguyen, Greig Taylor, Paul Gibson, and Raymond Gordon investigates the phenomenon of Vietnamese women’s leadership. The authors argue that

mainstream positivist approaches to work and organizational psychology impose alien theories of the self (personality) on women in the Global South. These are based on ‘textbook’ references that maintain Western (Global North) hegemonic beliefs that essentialize gender and what constitutes ‘effective’ leadership. In its place the authors draw on critical approaches to social psychology, which they argue provide the theoretical resources to capture the unique leadership experiences of Vietnamese women that is sensitive to the country’s history, socio-cultural context and gender. An important starting point is the inherent connection of the person’s experience of life in general and how this informs their leadership. Their research offers an in-depth temporal portrait of a Vietnamese woman leader (Mai) who narrated her life-story. On the basis of narrative inquiry, the authors allowed the voice of Mai to be heard directly, through which her leadership experiences are contextualized within her upbringing, youth, life experiences, and Vietnamese national practices.

Overall, the collection of papers constituting the Special Issue exemplify how ‘criticalizing’ could be done, and offer new ways to critically theorize, understand, and conduct research on relevant work and organizational psychology topics. They indicate ways to problematize existing notions, and showcase historical, economic-political, and postcolonial perspectives on the ways research is being done in work and organizational psychology. This also includes different methodological approaches to be able to gain new insights into the lived experiences of individuals in the workplace. We hope the Special Issue will interest international readers throughout work and organizational psychology and inspire others to start criticalizing their work, to move towards a discipline that is focused on the dignity of individuals at work, the development of fair and inclusive societies, and the well-being of the planet.

Toward an Ongoing Criticalizing Agenda in Work and Organizational Psychology

Working toward the goals mentioned above will require a collective effort to rethink the “business as usual” of work and organizational psychology, as rapid changes in economic, social and environmental contexts demand ongoing and reflexive inquiry into the psychology of work and workers. Criticalizing work and organizational psychology research recognizes that the critical and emancipatory goals discussed above may take different forms across publics, places and historical moments. It is in this pluralistic spirit that we urge scholars to build upon what has been achieved in this Special Issue.

First, criticalizing work and organizational psychology can involve working in constructive dialogue with adjacent fields to further its unique ability to examine psychological and structural aspects of workplaces. In the respect, the productive tension between “work/organizational” and “psychological” provides an opportunity to examine how psychological experience is situated within collective life, and that both should be studied together. In this sense, work and organizational psychologists can look to studies of labor within sociology or industrial relations, on the one side, and social and personality psychology, on the other, contributing experiential/psychological analysis to the former and economic/political analysis to the latter. Rather than emphasizing our disciplinary uniqueness, therefore, our unique contribution can be constituted by our place within that dialogue.

Second, criticalizing work and organizational psychology involves a renewed attention to pedagogy, which is scholars’ most immediate interface with the public, and through which we can engage with core values of critical thinking, social well-being, and emancipatory practice. Students in work and organizational psychology are being prepared for organizational and applied roles to which they will bring their training in human cognition, emotion and behavior. If there is a point at which psychology can directly shape how organizational actors take up their role, it is through the formation of those actors in the classroom. That said, work and organizational psychology has paid insufficient attention to

the unique tensions required in its pedagogy, and research around how students balance their practical (work and organizational) and humanistic (psychology) aspects in the classroom is important for a criticalizing agenda.

Third, working toward an emancipatory social agenda requires forms of social engagement beyond research and teaching within the academy, engaging with organizational practitioners, the public service, and civil society actors such as social movements. Such engagement can take the typical forms of work and organizational psychologists acting as subject-matter experts. However, deeper collaborations such as action research, public commentary, and working with activists can sensitize work and organizational psychologists to on-the-ground struggles that affects how actors think, feel and relate to their work. It can also bring new ideas to help organize and increase the effectiveness of practice. In general, social engagement is linked to criticalizing because it creates possibilities for the co-construction of knowledge between academia and the broader society, while giving academics an action orientation that can open new research questions as they arise out of the struggles of social life.

In sum, the current Special Issue is a call for an ambitious rethinking of what work and organizational psychology is capable of and how it can play an important role in our times. It is the culmination of several years of coordination and effort among colleagues, that brought editors, authors and reviewers together around shared concerns, and in doing so was part of our ongoing construction of our collective mission. This essay acknowledges and celebrates the community that this special issue has helped to form and reaches out to our colleagues across the field to participate in broadening and deepening this community.

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