

# Special Section Editorial: Flexibility at work – Compiling the collective wisdom, challenging conventional thinking, creating shared meaning

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The stated goal of the recently published special issue on flexibility at work (2019, Volume 12, Issue 2) was to assemble diverse perspectives on contemporary changes in work organizations and their implications on the individual, organizational, and societal level. Overall, we believe that this undertaking was successful and we want to use this opportunity to express our sincere gratitude and appreciation to all authors who contributed to making this project happen. Among others, contributions addressed the relationship between flexible work and private life, aspects of work and organizational design, and the changing nature of employment relationships. Moreover, the phenomenon of flexible work was contextualized within broader socio-political and political-economic developments and trajectories. Further, all of the contained articles call attention to and critically discuss the tensions, ambivalences, and contradictions associated with the concept of flexibility, that is, the dialectics between the humanistic idea of employee-oriented workplace practices and the neoliberal ideology of economic rationalization strategies and labor political power tactics. In our editorial to the special issue (Hornung & Sachse, 2019), we have included a disclaimer that it was not our intention to deductively present a grand theory of flexibility as an overarching framework to organize the contributions to the special issue. While this still holds true, we cannot help but inductively seeing a pattern or a *gestalt* emerge, which informs and advances our integrated and holistic understanding of the complex and multifaceted phenomenon of workplace flexibility. This, we believe, is made possible first and foremost by the fact that, despite the substantial diversity and heterogeneity of approaches, topics, and perspectives, all of the contributions to the special issue are tied together and unified by the common denominator of a shared underlying humanistic value system, which puts the working individuals in the center and takes

their psychological needs, capabilities, wellbeing, and development as the main reference point of theorizing and empirical investigation.

It could be argued that, by all means, such a humanistic value system is what can be righteously expected of all scholars in the field of applied psychology, which is, after all, a science of humans, seeking to generate knowledge on their cognitive processes, behaviors, experiences, and social interactions in real-world context, specifically, at work and in organizations (e.g., Greif, 2017; Grote & Guest, 2017; Hacker, 2000; Ulich, 2008). However, even a cursory survey of the field of work and organizational psychology shows that such a naive premise cannot be taken for granted. Large swaths of mainstream research, for instance, on performance management, personnel selection, and job attitudes, seem to focus primarily on profitable performance and organizationally mandated employee behaviors and orientations (e.g., Greenwood & van Buren, 2017; Volpert, 2004). If considered at all, the quality of the work experience and the wellbeing of the working individuals are often regarded as legitimate goals, only if, and to the extent, that it can be shown, or at least argued for, that they translate into economic advantages for employers (e.g., participatory high-performance work practices). In-between are approaches that focus on employee-oriented aspects (e.g., health and wellbeing), but seek to justify these through reference to their profitability (e.g., higher productivity, reduced absenteeism). In practice, the guiding idea of joint optimization of employee wellbeing and job performance in psychological research is tied to a number of preconditions and likely applies only to a limited range of jobs and work contexts (e.g., Dettmers et al., 2016; Hornung, 2012; Ulich & Nido, 2014). Therefore, while appeals to economic interest in order to justify humanization goals are a widely adopted strategy, and while we agree that this has some

legitimacy, it may also be a path of least resistance, which, is associated with the risk of „crowding out“ the inherent value and validity of humanistic concerns and objectives as intrinsic „stand-alone“ goals. This dilemma is most fittingly addressed by Adler, Forbes and Willmott (2007, p. 121), cautioning that „...prevailing structures of domination produce a systemic corrosion of moral responsibility when any concern for people or for the environment requires justification in terms of its contribution to profitable growth.“ Indeed, work and organizational psychology seems to be stuck in a pervasive double-bind to both employee-oriented and employer goals, which is often resolved by a „myth“ of „unitarism“, that is, a largely unquestioned assumption or narrative regarding congruence of employee and employer interests (e.g., Hornung, 2012).

Comparing and contrasting the extent to which humanistic and economic goals are prioritized can be instructive to recognize the underlying differences, and map out the „hidden fault lines“ dividing the scientific landscape (e.g., Islam & Zyphur, 2006; Volpert, 2004; Ulich, 2008). Only recently, these differences have been brought up as an explicit topic of controversial discussion in the European Association of Work and Organizational Psychology. Precisely, this refers to Bal and Dóci's (2018) critique of the pervasive and largely unchallenged morally, socially, and intellectually corrosive influences of neoliberal ideology on contemporary work practices and their representation in academic research. The importance of this current debate for research on workplace flexibility, which seems particularly susceptible to biasing ideological influences, has been discussed earlier and should not be reiterated here (Hornung & Höge, 2019 a). However, the coherence and consistency of the articles assembled in the special issue with regard to their underlying humanistic orientation demonstrate that alternative forms of research are possible. Of course, this is not to say, that the presented collection of articles is totally free of ideological assumptions, constructs, and arguments regarding workplace flexibility, but it shows there is a critical mass of researchers who are aware of these influences and try to avoid or counteract the associated biases and blind spots. In other words, (not only) when it comes to ideology, the path of self-reflexiveness is the goal and progress resides in the process.

In hindsight, and with some distance, we believe that the main achievements of the special issue can be summarized in three points: a) assembling the collective wisdom of a community of researchers, such that the integrated whole is more than the sum of its parts; b) transcending and challenging conventional thinking and management rhetoric on the particularly contested topic of workplace flexibility; and c) creating or strengthening a paradigm of shared understanding

and meaning regarding the broader phenomena under study (e.g., Flowerdew & Wang, 2015). It is our hope that the special issue can act as a vehicle to transport and disseminate these insights to a larger audience beyond the circle of involved researchers. However, despite our positive experiences with the process and optimistic expectations regarding the reach and impact of our collective efforts, we are aware of the potential constraint and criticism that the diversity within the group of contributors to the special issue is limited, as almost all of them are affiliated with the Institute of Psychology at the University of Innsbruck. To address this matter, we have invited a number of colleagues mostly from other institutions to review and comment on the articles in the special issue. These commentaries are assembled in the present special section. While the commentaries generally speak for themselves, a few selective remarks regarding the choice of commentators, their backgrounds, and specific perspectives and contributions appear warranted for the sake of contextualization, accentuation, and integration. Needless to say, we take the full responsibility and preemptively apologize for any mis- or overinterpretations, errors, omissions, and oversights that may have occurred in our following metacommentary.

First of all, we want to emphasize that we consider ourselves fortunate and honored by the well-composed group of scholars that has followed our invitation to contribute commentaries on the articles in the special issue. Starting out with a strong statement, Thomas Kühn provides a commentary on the Höge's (2019) opening article. Based on his own research background, Kühn recommends to integrate the life conduct approach with a life course perspective, which explicitly takes into account individual biographies and socializing life experiences (e.g., Kühn, 2017). Further, he proposes the critical and radical humanist social psychology of Erich Fromm as a framework to integrate societal, organizational perspectives on flexible work (e.g., Durkin, 2014). Specifically, this refers to how individuals deal with uncertainty and insecurity to craft a personal and occupational biography that suits and realizes their unique aspirations and abilities, including the societal and organizational conditions promoting or inhibiting the realization of human potentials, higher levels of consciousness, and comprehensive wellbeing and mental health. We regard these suggestions as particularly promising and valuable, among others, as the associated hermeneutic and psychoanalytic methodologies hold the potential to substantially enrich and deepen theorizing and research on the impact of flexibility on the life and psyche of affected individuals. A tribute to the legacy of the great humanist, Erich Fromm, Kühn's arguments are distinctively critical of the life conditions under flexible capitalism, yet they are also hopeful with regard to

the creative and self-actualizing tendencies of human beings, even under adverse circumstances – indeed, a well-placed and inspirational reminder.

Next, Jan Dettmers comments on the conceptual article by Glaser, Hornung & Höge (2019), who discuss new and increased job demands and paradoxes in flexible work systems. Established as a prolific scholar in psychological research on workplace flexibility, as well as a main proponent of the concept of self-endangering work behavior, Dettmers is uniquely qualified to comment on these issues (e.g., Dettmers, Kaiser & Fietze, 2013; Uglanova & Dettmers, 2018). In addition to emphasizing the importance of self-initiated stressors based on internalized and indirect control in flexible work systems, he expresses a healthy skepticism towards the individualization of working conditions through idiosyncratic deals (i-deals) in the context of the neoliberal erosion of and deconstruction of collective bargaining arrangements and broad-based employee benefits through individualizing (divisive) employment practices (e.g., Dundon, Harney & Cullinane, 2010). His well-presented critical analysis culminates in the recommendation that individual arrangements should always be a supplement to, rather than a substitute of, collective arrangements ensuring decent physical and psychological work and employment conditions for all employees – we could not agree more with this assessment, which corresponds to our own theorizing on i-deals (Hornung & Höge, 2019 b).

The following commentary by Thomas Rigotti, on Seubert, Hopfgartner and Glaser's (2019) article on the conceptualization and operationalization of precarious work, is especially appreciated (not to say precious), as it calls attention to classic ideas regarding the humanization of work and the quality of working life (e.g., Greif, 2017; Grote & Guest, 2017; Ulich, 2009). Rigotti argues that, on the one hand, such humanistic tendencies can be found, even in contemporary mainstream work and organizational psychology, while, on the other hand, he stresses that far more needs to be done to revive and realize these potentials and objectives. Rigotti speaks with some authority on these issues. His own research, which covers to whole breadth of topics in work and organizational psychology, including a strong focus on the changing nature of work and employment relationships (e.g., psychological contracts, job insecurity, non-standard work arrangements), has as a connecting „red thread“, an orientation towards the health, wellbeing, and development of the working individuals (e.g., Rigotti, Mohr & Isaksson, 2015; Rigotti, Otto & Mohr, 2007). As such, Rigotti stands in the tradition of scholars, who, on the one hand adhere to, or at least do not directly question or challenge, the paradigmatic conventions of mainstream research, but on the other hand try to uphold ethical responsibilities and commitments to humanistic principles of improv-

ing working conditions from an employee perspective (e.g., Greif, 2017; Grote & Guest, 2017; Hacker, 2018; Ulich, 2009). As mentioned above, this approach is currently called into question under conditions of the advanced neoliberal governance of work organizations (Bal & Dóci, 2018). Acknowledging that contemporary trajectories in the world of work are by no means supportive of such humanistic goals, Rigotti points out the current movement for the Future of Work and Organizational Psychology (Bal et al., 2019) as a promising and necessary development to update and upgrade the current research paradigm, challenging and revising outdated or counterfactual assumptions, and reorienting the future of the field towards more people-centered values (cf. Hacker, 2000; Ulich, 2000) – again, we wholeheartedly agree.

Subsequently, Britta Herbig draws on extensive knowledge and experience in the domains of applied psychology and occupational medicine (e.g., Herbig, Dragano & Angerer, 2013; Herbig, Schneider & Nowak, 2016) to critically review, contextualize, and complement the model of boundaryless work presented by Palm, Hornung and Glaser (2019). In her commentary she calls attention to the importance of cognitive abilities and thresholds for cognitive overload as well as the issue of fit between the nature of work tasks and the use of information and communication technologies (e.g., Hacker, 2018; Sachse & Furtner, 2016). Overall, her arguments make a convincing case for a more fine-grained analysis of dissolving work-home boundaries, both from the perspective of cognitive psychology, but also with regard to social-normative influences. Individual work-home integration preferences and behaviors, she suggests, may be more strongly shaped by social pressures than commonly assumed, raising the need to more critically and objectively evaluate their implications for employee wellbeing and health. Further, potential side-effects, even of personally desired flexible work, are discussed, including the possible erosion of important psychological functions of work, such as time-structuring and social relatedness. Overall, Herbig's commentary calls attention to the highly abstract, decontextualized, and often rather narrow conception of the work-home interface in applied psychology, demonstrating the need (and supporting our call) for more critical perspectives in research on workplace flexibility.

Andreas Müller and his associate Friedrich Kröner comment on the tripartite interaction model of task flexibility through work self-redesign proposed and tested by Hornung, Höge and Rousseau (2019). Exceptionally well suited to comment on this topic, Müller is known for research with a strong focus on work tasks, such as the application of action regulation theory to group problem-solving (e.g., Müller, 2009), conceptualization and measurement of work stress and strain

(e.g., Mohr, Müller, Rigotti, Aycan & Tschan, 2006) and the use of selection, optimization and compensation strategies at work (e.g., Müller, Heiden, Herbig, Poppe & Angerer, 2016). Indeed, while these authors agree with and elaborate on the need to explore new models of work design, they also call attention to new forms of work stressors and strains arising from the focus on individualized and proactive perspectives (e.g., Ulich, 2016). These arguments are very much in line with the contributions of Dettmers and Herbig, who both stress the emergence of self-endangering work behavior as a characteristic phenomenon for flexible workplaces (Dettmers, Deci, Baeriswyl, Berset & Krause, 2016; Ulich & Nido, 2014). Yet, Müller and Kröner take these considerations one step further, pointing out a controversial issue that work and organizational psychology currently seems to be grappling with: Job resources, most importantly potentials for control and autonomy, are conventionally defined as working conditions that support employees in achieving work goals and contribute to work-related well-being and health (e.g., Glaser, Seubert, Hornung & Herbig, 2015). If, however, under certain circumstances, these job features lose their positive role, do classic assumptions regarding the unequivocally positive role of these resources have to be overturned or revised? Seemingly paradox notions of „autonomy demands“ allude to this unresolved dialectic, challenging long-standing static taxonomies of work characteristics. Indeed, the implications are quite far-reaching. Following Müller and Kröner, a dynamic and dialectic reconceptualization of work characteristics may be needed, essentially contesting some of the conceptual and methodical core foundation of work and organizational psychology. We note that this discussion is not completely new (e.g., Glibmann & Peters, 2001; Hüttges & Moldaschl, 2009), yet substantive solutions, or at least their integration into a coherent new research paradigm in work and organizational psychology, seem to be lacking (Hacker, 2000; Ulich, 2000).

Lastly, our colleagues, Wolfgang G. Weber and Christine Unterrainer, took it upon themselves to provide a knowledgeable, instructive, and encouraging commentary on Hornung and Höge's (2019) preliminary considerations on the dialectics of flexibility between humanistic ideal and neoliberal ideology. A main proponent of a critical and radical-humanist stream of work and organizational psychology, Weber's research spans boundaries between genuine psychological topics and broader sociological theories (e.g., how societal influences shape work tasks and activities). After contributions on the collective action regulation of work groups (e.g., Weber, 1999), together with his team, he specialized in research on alternative forms of organizing, specifically, conditions, characteristics and consequences of different forms of structurally an-

chored organizational democracy (e.g., Weber, Unterrainer & Höge, 2019). This expertise forms the backdrop against which Weber and Unterrainer propose three valuable extensions and venues for future research: First, challenging the individualistic paradigm in contemporary organizational research, they make the case for more explicitly taking into account the conditions for collective self-actualization, specifically, arguing that the humanistic ideal of individuation cannot be realized in isolation, but is always embedded in social structures of supportive relationships, mutual interdependence, and cooperative pursuit of shared goals (e.g., Weber & Jeppesen, 2017). Secondly, they identify the erosion of collective and institutionalized forms of worker organization and structural representation in the current form of neoliberal capitalisms as a threat to the wellbeing and personal development of employees, exposed to increasingly unbalanced and unmitigated power-dependence relationships (e.g., Dundon et al., 2010). Finally, they suggest, that, even in the contemporary situation, potentials for the realization of humanistic goals of individuation, solidarity, and emancipation may be found in interorganizational networks of democratic companies and social enterprises, potentially forming the nucleus of a new economy for the common good, transcending the socially and ecologically destructive tendencies of profit-orientation and competition (e.g., Felber, 2015; Stumpf & Sommer, 2019; Ulich, 2009). Taken together, in these three suggestions, we recognize a structure that not only reflects our intentions to shed light on the implications of flexibility at work for individuals, organizations, and society, but also provides testimony, as to how these three levels or domains are inseparably linked and reciprocally interdependent – overall, we could not think of a better synthesis of important directions to extend our thinking in future research.

To conclude, we are convinced that the commentaries assembled here provide not only a supplement, but rather a substantive extension to the articles in the special issue, specifically, as they give an impression of differences, continuities, and transformations in research traditions in work and organizational psychology with regard to the humanization of work and improving the quality of working life from an employee perspective. As we already stated in our editorial to the special issue (Hornung & Sachse, 2019), the quality and usefulness of the collective research efforts presented and commented on in the course of this project, ultimately remains up for readers to judge. However, based on the positive feedback and reinforcement by the authors and commentators, as well as our own experience, the process was useful for generating and integrating scientific knowledge, as well as perceived as educational, supportive, and motivating by the involved researchers. As stated in the journal's goals and

objectives, academic periodicals have evolved out of the correspondence among scientists, presenting and discussing their latest ideas and discoveries. Accordingly, promoting academic communication and providing a forum for researchers to exchange thoughts and comment on each other's work, has been the inspiration and impetus for establishing the *Journal Psychologie des Alltagshandelns / Psychology of Everyday Activity*, more than a decade ago (Sachse, 2008). In light of the sheer explosion of the amount of published research and the number of academic journals, increasing anonymity, and widespread disenchantment with the conventional handling of the peer-review process by large publishing houses, today, such a forum seems to be more direly needed than ever. We hope that, in conjunction with the articles in the special issue, the commentaries presented here provide the reader with an experience that can live up to our stated aspirations – compiling the collective wisdom, challenging conventional thinking, and creating shared meaning on the conundrum of flexibility at work.

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