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Progress, but in the Wrong Direction? A Critique of Research Trends in Occupational Health Psychology

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ABSTRACT

Occupational health psychology is concerned with all aspects of work-related well-being, including forms, determinants, prevention, and interventions. Research in this field has advanced substantially in past decades, using increasingly sophisticated data and statistical methods, employing an expanding range of differentiated constructs, and building connections with adjacent disciplines of work and organizational psychology, organizational behavior, and human resource management. From an emerging critical perspective, however, this “progress” has gone at least partly in the wrong direction. Based on a narrative review of the literature, three research trends are identified that threaten to shift or dilute the perspective of occupational health psychology, counteracting the goal of improving conditions, health, and wellbeing of working people in general. These are the growing focus on positive concepts, such as work engagement, thriving, flourishing, and resilience; the prioritization of organizationally desirable outcomes of productivity and performance; and emphasizing the proactive role of individuals in interacting with and shaping their work environments in constructs such as job crafting. Combined, trends of positivity, productivity, and proactivity distract from the predominantly health-impairing effects of work for the majority, build up normative pressure to find meaning at work, devalue occupational health as a stand-alone goal independent from economic benefits, and shift the responsibility for improving working conditions to individuals. Involuntarily, this discriminates against vulnerable and marginalized groups. This contribution is a call for critical reflexivity in engaging with these developments, emanating from adjacent fields, to strengthen the unique perspective of occupational health psychology, recommendations for which are developed and discussed.

Keywords: epistemology; performativity; positivity; proactivity; reflexivity