The British
Psychological Society
Professional Practice Board

Division of
Occupational Psychology
Applying the science of psychology to work

The concerns and challenges of working in the field of occupational psychology
Members' views

Report for the BPS Division of Occupational Psychology Committee and Workforce Planning Standing Advisors Committee
March 2015

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Contents

1. Purpose of the report

The future of psychology and its professions is of paramount importance. In the UK, the British Psychological Society (BPS) comprises 10 divisions of psychology. These include the divisions of Academics, Researchers and Teachers in Psychology, Clinical Psychology, Health Psychology, Forensic Psychology, Educational and Child Psychology, Counselling Psychology, Neuropsychology, Educational Psychology, Sport and Exercise Psychology, and Occupational Psychology.

Each division acts on behalf of its own specialism of psychology. For example, the Division of Occupational Psychology (DOP) 'promotes the professional interests of occupational psychologists' and is run by volunteers who strive to help members through a range of activities and developed resources.

The BPS itself is comprised of key committees. One of which includes the Workforce Planning Advisors Standing Committee (WPASC) who are commissioned by the Professional Practice Board (PPB). Their main function is to 'develop professional practice advice and guidance related to Workforce Planning'.

Together, these two committees (DOP and WPASC) provide essential roles in facilitating a continued and growing profession for psychologists working in the field of occupational psychology (OP). In order to achieve this, both committees must develop strategies and actions plans to tackle key challenges and concerns.

The purpose of this report is to provide evidence from members of the DOP and key individuals in the field around challenges and concerns they have working in the OP field both now and in the future. The report also highlights suggested solutions by members to these challenges and concerns. It is the hope of this report that the presented findings will be used to develop key action points for each committee.

2. Data collection

The evidence for this report was collected using two methods: 1) group discussion; and 2) interview. The responses from each method were combined for this report (see section 3. Findings).

Brief descriptions of each method are given below.

2.1 Group discussion

As part of the DOP's Annual Conference 2015, a discussion session was held to collect views of members who work or study in the field of OP. The purpose of the session was to allow members to share and discuss their perceived challenges and concerns of working in the field of OP, both in the present and the future, and consider possible solutions to those concerns.

The session lasted one hour and was divided into two parts. First, delegates (N=17) were split into two groups and asked to discuss and share their views on the following questions:

- What are the challenges you have faced working in the field of occupational psychology?
- What are your concerns for working in this field?
- How do you think we can tackle these concerns?

Discussions lasted for approximately 30 minutes and each group had a facilitator who made notes throughout.

The participating delegates were both men and women of varying ages, and from a wide range of backgrounds, including students (MSc and PhD), those who had just completed their MSc in OP, academics and chartered practitioners.

The second part of the session involved groups feeding back their discussion points and engaging in more collaborative discussion with the whole group. These points were noted by the session presenter for this report.

2.2 Interview

Several key individuals within the UK OP field were identified by the DOP Committee as being in key positions to contribute to the report. These individuals were invited to comment on the above questions (see section 2.1). One of these individuals participated in an interview. This individual is a successful academic and practitioner with substantial experience of working in OP within the UK.

The interviewee was asked the same questions as the groups (see section 2.1). The interview lasted approximately 30 minutes and the interviewer took notes on the interviewee's responses.

3. Findings

The group discussions and interview highlighted a number of challenges, concerns and possible solutions. Specifically, there were seven main areas of challenge and concern (section 3.1) and seven solutions to these challenges and concerns (section 3.2).

3.1   Challenges and concerns

3.1.1 Our contribution and uniqueness

This was a key area of concern raised by members. Members felt we are lacking a clear, consistent, and acknowledged identity as a profession. Members find this difficult and are having to frequently explain to potential clients, employers, organisations, or others, what OP is and the contribution and value that it brings over competitors. This makes it very difficult to acquire work and several members raised concerns over perceived barriers for moving in to the field post-MSc.

Once the Masters has been completed and graduates are looking for their next job, without a clear message about OP's contribution and uniqueness over other disciplines and occupations, convincing non-Occupational Psychologists to employ our services may be extremely challenging and potentially discourage graduates from remaining in our field. A clear message of what we offer and others do not offer is missing but greatly needed.

3.1.2 Others doing 'our' work

Members expressed a distinct awareness that there are people doing the work that they considered appropriate only for Occupational Psychologists. There are two aspects to this; the first is that there are many people out there practicing OP and doing the same things, but they are not calling themselves Occupational Psychologists. They may call themselves Business Psychologists, Work Psychologists, Management Consultants, or similar. It was also noted that these individuals may have no psychological training or qualifications, despite their implied titles. However, what they are doing is the work described under the Health and Care Professions Council's (HCPC) protected title of 'Occupational Psychologist'. This was highly alarming to members as they felt that work that should be conducted by appropriately skilled and qualified Occupational Psychologists is being taken away from them and carried out by potentially unregulated practitioners and organisations.

The second aspect to this issue is concerning other fields of social science who are also being employed to do very similar, if not the same, work of Occupational Psychologists. For example, Behavioural Analysts and Health Economists were two professions raised that appear to be overlapping on OP's areas of expertise. Again, these issues relate to the earlier concern (section 3.1.1) regarding our unique contributions over these other disciplines and professions.

3.1.3 The qualifications process

The next frequently raised concern was the OP chartership process to become an Occupational Psychologist. It was noted that there is an increasing difficulty in getting people through their chartership. Many graduates are choosing not to become chartered. It was a big sell for academic courses in the past but now this is not really the case. Chartership is important for professional practice but difficult to convince new people coming through of this importance. Several of the participating delegates were at the stage of considering whether to do charterhsip or not, and a central concern for them is that chartership is perceived as too tough and the BPS procedures and requirements are making it unnecessarily difficult for people to complete. This was noted as a potential reason why people were being put off from becoming Occupational Psychologists and pursuing a career in OP.

Comparisons were made with the Chartered Institute of Personnel Development (CIPD) route of professional qualifications and their 'saleable' status updates at the end of each stage. For example, one person spoke about the allure of the CIPD Masters course. Upon completion the graduate had a recognised chartered qualification. This was acknowledged as an appealing and attractive alternative to OP and very similar work in practice. It is difficult to convince a person to continue on the BPS chartership route, which involves several extra years of extra post-MSc qualifications, accompanied by high financial costs for doing so, and also the extra fees accompanied with becoming registered with the HCPC and the BPS.

Another point raised in relation to chartership was about supervisors. Chartership supervisors have to be trained and give a lot of their time and energy into fulfilling this role. However, a key question of concern was 'what is in it for them?' Supervisors are a crucial component of the qualification process but it was acknowledged that they receive very little in return for their time. For example, many supervise at no charge to the supervisee. This little return for supervisors may be contributing to a reduction in their numbers as people are now refusing to take on this role.

Supervisor feedback was also noted. Questions around what we are doing to collect this information and incorporate it to improve the chartership process were expressed. Perceptions were that, currently, this feedback and improvement process is not happening particularly well (if at all) and needs addressing if we are to continue improving and getting individuals appropriately qualified to practice.

The final concern raised about the qualification process relates to the presence of OP at the foundation level. The BPS's accredited undergraduate psychology degree, which all Occupational Psychologists must complete (or an appropriate conversion course) to become chartered, must cover a wide range of areas of psychology. However, OP is not mandatory and perhaps only an optional module on some courses. It was highlighted that the DOP is the second largest division of the BPS and representing a large proportion of members and work that is conducted in society. Yet, is it not a compulsory area on the curriculum like other areas of psychology. This was a concern because OP is an important area of psychology, and in order to secure our future, we need to secure our place at the foundation BSc training level.

3.1.4 Our evidence

Another concern noted was on the evidence base of OP. One of the important aspects of being an Occupational Psychologist is the appropriate use of psychological theory and evidence to solve work-related problems with people. However, communications, publications, and similar are circulating amongst members that perhaps we are not as evidence-based as we would like to think. From the discussions, some members thought perhaps it was easier for academics to go back to the evidence and access this information, but for practitioners who have less time and restricted access to journals and reports it is much harder and often they are not given an option to do this. Members wondered how they ensure their evidence-based practice and do they have all the right skills to do it (e.g. running meta-analyses, performing systematic reviews). Questions around how we do statistics and our approach to knowledge and theory were also raised and how similar are we to other areas of psychology? Members felt this concern and their related questions needed to be addressed.

3.1.5 Globalisation

It was highlighted that Occupational Psychologists from the UK can find it challenging when trying to work in a different country. This could be for a number of reasons, including confusion over different titles, recognised qualifications, and variations in specialist skills. It seems that there is difficulty in comparing Occupational Psychologists and the standards across different countries making it a challenge to work overseas. Working abroad it is an important part of professional life for many UK Occupational Psychologists, trainees from the UK, or those who have been trained in the UK, and therefore it is a concern that is highly important to many in our field.

Another related point raised was the importance or prestige given to OP in the UK. In comparison to mainland Europe, it seems that OP carries more influence and is better positioned and promoted compared to in the UK. We need to be in a better position and have credence to the work we do both here in the UK, abroad, and to facilitate global working.

3.1.6 Availability and access to fellow members

Being members of a large membership organisation (i.e. the BPS), a valued asset is the availability of others with similar interests and/or profession who can provide social support, training, and other help if any problems or difficulties arise. However, to benefit from this, it is necessary to be able to contact other members of the BPS and DOP where appropriate. However, members raised the difficulty they continually experience when trying to contact other members of the BPS. From their experiences, blockages are occurring at the BPS-level. Members here thought this was especially limiting and devaluing the membership to the BPS (and consequently the DOP). Also, it raised concerns for members that perhaps the BPS is not being as helpful and supportive as it could/should be. With that, questions around whether they are acting in the best interest of its members were raised.

3.1.7 Our future

The final concern raised was a general feeling of 'unknown' about our occupation's future. For example, what are the numbers needed for the work that Occupational Psychologists do now and what would be needed in the future? Having this information would provide some very useful and pragmatic insight allowing key changes and modifications in our field where necessary. For example, adaptations to training may be required for ensuring appropriate knowledge and skills for accommodating what the economy needs. At present, we do not seem to know what is needed.

There were also concerns around universities. For example, the potential impact of university fees on the number of people choosing to study OP and pursue the career of an Occupational Psychologist. Are we doing enough to prevent such an impact? In addition, concerns for academics who teach OP were raised. Who are the next OP professors in the UK? Are we doing enough to help their career development to ensure continued teaching of our subject? Again, this information is unknown and uncertain.

Finally, there was concern around the loss of many OP graduates from 'our' field. Many students are choosing to work in similar fields, such as HR, and follow further qualifications with the CIPD. The concern is a resulting 'OP brain-drain' and the loss of many of our Occupational Psychologists of the future. Without students, and academics, we have a potentially critical issue for our profession's future.

3.2 Solutions

3.2.1 Developing a clear identity and voice

The dominant solution provided by members was the need for OP to develop a clear identity and voice. This idendity should provide a strong message about who we are, what we do, and what our unique contributions are over other non-Occupational Psychologists. It is important for members to know that the public, organisations and other professions recognise and value OP. This identity must be heard and efforts are required to ensure a strong voice is developed. In doing so, members feel that UK OP could make much more of a contribution and impact on policy and society. Currently, this identity and voice is missing but members strongly wish to have the reputation for being the number one resource people turn to when there are people issues in the workplace.

3.2.2 Better rewards for chartership

Reassessing and changing our qualification process was another suggested solution. This process currently is perceived as too difficult, too expensive, and too long to complete. Having more rewards at each stage of the process and not just upon completion may be a good resolution to this problem. Adopting a similar approach to the CIPD was noted. So for example, at the end of the MSc course, giving graduates a new title that provides recognition of a certain level of skills and knowledge in the field of OP. It was thought this acknowledgement of acquired knowledge and skills may provide some better incentives and be motivating for individuals to continue on the chartership process. In addition, it may also provide some 'salable' status that trainees (and their employers) would benefit from. The chartership process should not be seen as too difficult or challenging but a worthwhile and valuable qualification to pursue. Organisations and consultancies employing trainees could also offer higher salaries at each stage of the process to reflect a direct reward for trainee efforts and commitment to the profession.

In addition, concerning the issue of supervisors, ensuring their views and feedback on the chartership process are collected and taken on board would be positive step. This should include making changes where necessary to continue improving the process in the future.

Finally, maintaining an adequate pool of supervisors. Looking at ways to improve incentives and support was a noted requirement to help address this concern.

3.2.3 Better help and support from the BPS and DOP

Help and support from the BPS and DOP was another idea discussed. Members felt that sometimes the BPS creates barriers to members rather than helping. Members wanted their requests acknowledged and appropriate changes made when issues are being identified. A simple example was given which involved allowing members to contact each other. Several members have had issues with this and told by the BPS that they are not allowed to contact one another because of data protection issues. However, it seems other professional organisations have no problem in this respect. These organisations not only allow such communication between members but facilitate them. Without being able to communicate with other members, it stands to reason that members may view paying the

BPS and DOP as an unjustified expense if they can not do what they want or feel they need to do. In turn, they may join other membership organisations and leave the BPS and DOP altogether.

3.2.4 Ensuring evidence and its availability

In relation to the OP evidence base, members thought having readily available evidence would be a very useful resource to provide to members. For example, reports, reviews (e.g. meta-analyses, systematic reviews) for academics and practitioners. Journal papers or reports can be expensive and often only accessible to large organisations or universities who have the budgets to pay for these resources. Having open-source materials or evidence for BPS/DOP members was considered a very useful way to address this.

There was also a suggestion made that the work of Occupational Psychologists could be recorded as evidence and published (for example, in Cochrane databases) for wider audiences to see and acknowledge the value and quality of our work. In doing so, this would also relate to expanding our voice on society.

Members suggested that to ensure what we do is evidence-based we need to not only to have the evidence available but ensure it is put into practice. It can often be a challenge when clients want answers quickly and cheaply, not caring about the evidence behind solutions to their problems. Despite strong efforts to persuade a client of this crucial step, clients and employers may still refuse to allow this time. Knowing that we may not be carrying out the best solution based on the most appropriate and up-to-date evidence, we may need to take a stand and walk away from these kinds of projects. Whilst this can be very difficult, for financial reasons or because our competitors will pick up this work, it is (or should be) a key component of what makes us better than non-Occupational Psychologists. Helping members and giving advice about how to lead a difficult discussion like this, sharing our experiences, and supporting each other during situations like this would be helpful. Clients (and the public) need to be made aware that without time to adequately review the evidence, solutions are unlikely to give the best and safest outcomes.

3.2.5 Long-term planning and forecasting

Conducting sufficient forecasting and long-term planning was highlighted as a necessity for the future of OP, and psychology in general. This information would provide important material to help us plan for the needs of organisations, the economy and society, allowing our profession to continue and adapt appropriately in the future. The responsibility of forecasting was thought to be that of the WPASC but the DOP and the government should be included in these discussions if possible. It was noted, however, that whilst forecasting can be difficult it is not impossible to carry out. Some members highlighted that this is something that has been done in the US for Industrial/Organisational Psychology and we should try and do this for the UK. Similarly, looking to other countries who have a strong OP presence may also be useful in this respect.

In addition to forecasting, it can be assumed that teaching OP will continue to be an important part of the career of an Occupational Psychologist. In light of the earlier challenge that Occupational Psychologists and OP reflect a significant proportion of psychologists in the UK, this branch of psychology should be reflected earlier in the

psychology career path. Including a compulsory OP module in all accredited psychology undergraduate degrees was argued as an important solution.

3.2.6 Cross-country consistencies

Regarding helping those who carry out OP work abroad, trying to develop a set of OP standards applicable across many countries or continents would be beneficial. Undertaking a process where consistencies and differences are identified and producing some information and documentation would be valuable and perhaps alleviate some of the barriers to global working.

Also, looking to and emulating other countries who are successful at promoting OP would be a useful learning exercise. Exploring the strategies they use and thinking about how we could adopt these in the UK could potentially be quite a fruitful action to carry out. It was suggested that some attempts are already being made to do this (e.g. by Dave Bartram) but much more resources are needed to do this fully and effectively.

3.2.7 More active legal protection

Finally, members requested that more action is taken to tackle the problem of those who are carrying out work of an Occupational Psychologist but are not using the title. As mentioned above, members felt that the title 'Occupational Psychologist' and the work falling under this title is legally protected by the HCPC. Therefore, anyone practicing this work but not registered by the HCPC is liable to legal action taken against them. However, currently there appears to be insufficient resources in place to carry out such legal actions against these individuals or organisations. Members had not heard of any action been taken against anyone despite knowing that it is occurring. It was agreed by members that more should be done to protect what we do. The BPS, DOP and HCPC need to work together to address this and start taking appropriate legal action. This would serve not only as a deterrent, but may influence those practicing OP work without chartered status to gain the appropriate qualifications.

4. Conclusions

From the data collected, it is clear that there are a number of challenges and concerns for individuals working and studying in the field of OP. These concerns cover a range of topics and several solutions were also highlighted as ways to address these concerns. It is the hope of this report that sufficient identification of challenges and concerns, as well as solutions, have been provided to assist to DOP and WPASC.

It should be noted that the sample here was quite small as attraction to the discussion session was low during the conference. This was likely to have been influenced by the presentations of parallel sessions. Also, response and participation rates for the interviews were disappointingly low. Therefore in the future, data collection should attempt to maximise the number of members engaged in this activity (e.g. holding a discussion session at the conference when there are no other sessions running) to ensure all the concerns and challenges are identified for developing comprehensive action plans and strategies. However, the challenges and concerns raised here were reasonably consistent across groups and the interview giving some reassurance of these findings.

Lastly, these concerns may change over time. It is therefore suggested that regular data collection exercises (e.g. holding national conference sessions) and reports such as this are regularly conducted to help appropriate actions by the committees.

5. Acknowledgments

The author: Dr Claire Hardy CPsychol was an Ordinary member of the DOP Committee and the Occupational Psychology representative on the Workforce Planning Advisors Standing Committeeat the time of conducting this piece of work. She is currently a Postdoctoral Research Worker in the Department of Psychology at the Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology and Neuroscience within King's College London, UK.

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