

# Occupational psychology in a changing world

Top occupational psychologists discuss the state of the discipline

## Rob Briner

What's wrong with occupational psychology and can we fix it? In case you like surprise endings this is a spoiler alert: The answers are going to be 'a lot' and 'maybe'. But first another question: What comes to mind when you think of occupational psychology? Are you thinking psychometric tests and employee selection; besuited corporate management types with nice cars; something that's a peripheral though lucrative area of psychology?

If this is what comes to mind, then I reckon you're not far off even if you are stereotyping a bit. There's not much inherently evil about psychometric tests, suits, nice cars, and making a bit of money, but when any area of psychology becomes even partly defined by and identified with such things then it has problems. These problems are not new and are not confined to UK occupational psychology. But, before discussing just a few of them, it's important to understand the perhaps unusual contexts in which occupational psychologists operate.

Nearly all occupational psychology practitioners work for themselves or in small consultancies. Work and earnings are precarious and unpredictable, as they are for other freelancers. It may be difficult to turn down work and difficult to do it in the ways one thinks best. No career structure exists and very few are qualified beyond MSc. Most continuing professional development concerns new commercial techniques rather than more

fundamental training or education. It's a tough business environment because occupational psychologists have no unique or protected practice niche. There is nothing occupational psychologists do that isn't also done by others.

The context for occupational psychology academics is also somewhat unusual. Their number continues to shrink, and occupational psychology plays less of a role in undergraduate psychology teaching. Even before neuroscience began to dominate, occupational psychology was the poor relation to other applied areas, such as educational and clinical. Most academics now work in business schools where they are more or less indistinguishable from organisational behaviour academics. Given the relative level of academic salaries many also undertake consultancy work.

So much for context – what about the problems? First, it seems that many occupational psychology practices are questionable. Search the web for

'chartered occupational psychologist' and you'll find a wide array of services which have no or very mixed empirical support, including emotional intelligence measurement and training, coaching, talent management, stress management, team building, employee engagement, positive psychology interventions, management development, 360 degree feedback, attitude surveys, and so on. Scientist-practitioner or evidence-based approaches are not widely adopted. But it's the context rather than the individuals involved that is largely to blame. In such a competitive market clients call the shots, simply wanting to buy a service rather than analysing what the problems might be. They are usually even less interested in evaluating interventions or engaging with the evidence for them. This problem is partly compounded by the tendency for occupational psychology to focus on its psychometric expertise.

A second problem is the quality and quantity of the research. Occupational psychologists appear to treat the Likert scale as the final crowning achievement of social science methodology and to be unable to accept that cross-sectional data can't even begin to address cause-effect research questions. Much of the published research, though perhaps valuable in other respects, is of little direct relevance to practice. Academics, like practitioners, are working in a context that rewards particular behaviours – which means researching what is publishable rather than what is important in other senses. Occupational psychology does not appear to draw on, or even sometimes to have a basic awareness of, developments in other areas of psychology.

The third problem considered here, and one first observed at least 50 years ago in Baritz's (1960) *The Servants of*



A peripheral though lucrative area of psychology?

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*Power: A History of Social Science in American Industry*, is occupational psychology's bias towards the interests of management. Occupational psychologists routinely emphasise improved organisational performance as the main goal of research and interventions. Employee well-being is usually framed as important because of its assumed effect on performance. This bias not only helps create weak and narrowly focused research and practice, it also silences debate about what the values of occupational psychology should be (see Lefkowitz's 2003 book *Ethics and Values in Industrial-Organizational Psychology*).

So what to do? Given the importance of work to individuals and society you might expect occupational psychology to be a vital and significant area of applied psychology. Instead it is one in which practice appears to have limited regard for evidence, with a dwindling number of academics producing narrow and hard-to-apply research, and one whose values and identity are in need of renewal. The solutions seem obvious though unlikely given the context: Critically evaluate practice, take evidence seriously, improve research quality, and examine our values. It sounds bleak, but I just don't know how problems this ingrained can be fixed. I am pretty sure, though, that nothing will change until they are openly acknowledged and discussed.

### Ivan Robertson

I've been an occupational psychologist since the early 1970s and I love working in the area. In my opinion it provides an unbeatable combination of relevance and the challenge to make a practical, evidence-based contribution. I'd like to start by selectively highlighting some of the contributions made by occupational psychology and make a brief comment on a major change in focus that I believe is emerging.

One important area of occupational psychology, that brings benefits to both organisations and the people who work within them, is personnel assessment and selection. The research in this area is extensive and very clear – using psychological knowledge to design and implement personnel selection processes brings benefit both to organisations (in terms of improved effectiveness) and to the people who work within the organisations (in terms of increased satisfaction and well-being). It has also been known for decades that better personnel selection can make a

major contribution to the wider national economy (see Schmidt & Hunter, 1998). As well as leading to practical processes used in organisations, the research in personnel selection and assessment has also produced significant methodological advances. For example, although meta-analysis techniques had their origins in research in education, much of the ground-breaking work on meta-analysis techniques was done by personnel selection researchers – Hunter, Schmidt and Jackson's seminal book on the topic was published in 1982.

I'm not arguing that occupational psychology is somehow more important or better than other areas of psychology, but it is a relevant and important area of the discipline that has a significant impact on many people's working lives and is capable of making contributions of relevance to the wider discipline. This sometimes makes me a little frustrated at the lack of prominence given to occupational psychology in mainstream psychology departments – a consequence of which has been a migration of occupational psychologists from psychology departments to business schools. Is this good for the profession?

Historically, there has been a focus on research and practice that leads to better performance of individuals, groups and organisations. The last decade has seen a growth of interest in psychological well-being and increased interest in the

relationships between well-being and performance. This increased emphasis on well-being does not mean that occupational psychologists have lost

interest in performance, but it does highlight a broadening of focus, away from narrow performance-related issues.

Research confirms that employee psychological well-being is important for both the employee and the organisation. For employees psychological well-being is linked to important individual outcomes, including a range of mental and physical health issues, with lower levels of psychological well-being linked to poorer health. The impact of job strain on the individual has been heavily reported by researchers. The results demonstrate that

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factors in the job, such as low levels of control and autonomy, are associated with an increased risk of serious illness, including coronary heart disease. For employers, positive psychological well-being amongst their employees has been shown to be related to a range of beneficial organisation-level outcomes including customer satisfaction, lower sickness absence and, in the case of NHS hospitals, lower rates of MRSA amongst patients.

The two areas that I've mentioned – personnel selection and psychological well-being – do not reflect the full range of occupational psychology by any means. But they do provide good examples of the scope and relevance of research and practice in occupational psychology. They also illustrate how occupational psychology, as well as being relevant to people's everyday experience of work, is tied to research and theory in other areas of psychology. For example much of the work in personnel selection draws heavily on research and theory in individual differences (personality, cognition, etc.) and current work on psychological well-being at work is strongly connected to positive psychology research and theory (Linley et al., 2010). Perhaps the long-term future of the profession will be to move closer to business-related disciplines, but I feel that the connection

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with other areas of psychology needs to be maintained.

### Fiona Patterson

I would like to highlight five particular challenges to encourage further debate in the broader academic and practitioner community.

First, identity and public image. I identify myself as a psychologist who works in business, rather than a business person who happens to be trained in psychology. Every occupational psychologist will confirm that the general public knows little about our profession, often confusing us with occupational therapists or management consultants. Within the psychology community, we are regularly stereotyped as sharp-suited salespeople. The term 'consultant' is often used as a derogatory term in academic circles; and for practitioners, academics are regularly accused of being too removed from the 'real world', lacking empathy for client groups.

The occupational psychology community is concerned about public image; the respect and acceptance of occupational psychology as a discipline and profession is at the very core of our disquiet (see Rhodes, 2010, who laments the flashmob in Trafalgar Square). The occupational psychology community needs to learn how to best communicate with our various constituencies more effectively – to address the extent to which we are recognised (and valued) by corporate and policy decision makers and indeed, by other psychologists.

Second, are occupational psychologists viewed as focusing more on commercial prospects of our work rather than contribution to society? In preparing this commentary, it was suggested to me that the reason occupational psychologists don't often publish in *The Psychologist* is that 'we are all too busy out in organisations earning a large day rate'. And yet, to my knowledge, most occupational psychologists are employed in the public sector. We could do more to publicise our contribution to society.

In external consulting roles, how we get paid is an issue. In response to a recent occupational psychology

conference paper on validation studies a colleague said: 'Your results are helpful, we'd like to evaluate our work, but can't, because our clients won't pay for it.' Do other professions fail to scrutinise the quality of their work because the client won't pay for it? The reality for practising occupational psychologists however, is that few organisations are willing to resource interventions that require adherence to research principles and findings. Given the scale of many occupational psychology interventions, clients often view solutions as too expensive or even unnecessary to address a problem. When it comes to evaluation, occupational psychologists tend to appraise their work for intrinsic motives.

Third is the perennial issue of improving academic-practitioner understanding. For the British Psychological Society's centenary in 2001 I edited a special issue of the *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*. I had witnessed increasing tensions between academic and practitioners members in the Society's Division of Occupational Psychology (DOP), so I commissioned Neil Anderson and colleagues to review the issues. They highlighted a divergence of interests

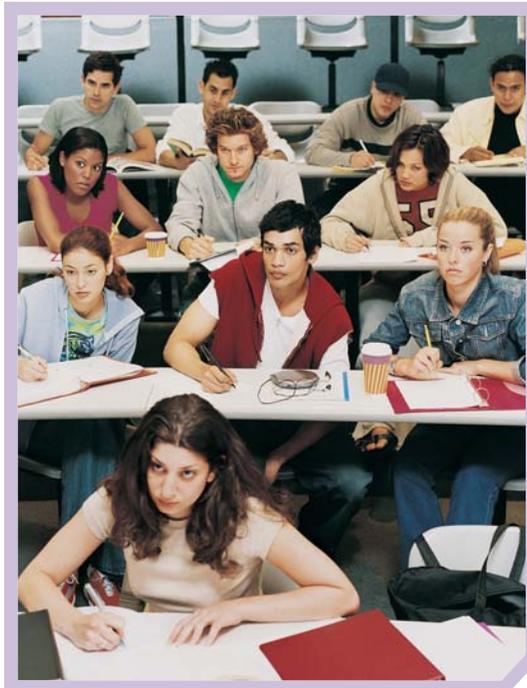
forcing academics towards pedantic science and practitioners towards popularist science. They proposed engaging in political activity with stakeholders to maximise opportunities for practising 'pragmatic science'.

In the same year, the Association of Business Psychology was established by practitioner occupational psychologists who felt the DOP was 'too academic in its approach'. Ten years on, this fragmentation of occupational psychology has significantly diluted our capacity to lobby our various stakeholders.

Fourth, occupational psychology education/training programmes need revision and enhanced formal connections with employers. Occupational psychology continues to attract large numbers of students in the UK. Some postgraduate courses have closed recently, mostly through lack of staff. A significant proportion of occupational psychology teaching is now delivered in business schools, not psychology departments. Occupational psychology no longer figures as a core knowledge domain on the psychology undergraduate curriculum – so where is our next generation? The postgraduate occupational psychology curriculum needs updating to ensure relevance. The OP-FIRST project (2006) had considerable input from academics and practitioners, but recommended revisions to the education/training guidelines are yet to be adopted.

Few students go on to practise as occupational psychologists. For those that do, we need to find new ways for occupational psychology postgraduates to gain skills related to practice. It is not sufficient for employers to blame universities, as has often been the case. More formal engagement of employers with universities is needed, but who should bear the cost? Universities, employers, students?

Finally, the impact of occupational psychology is growing – how can we optimise the opportunities? The work of occupational psychologists is both practically relevant and scientifically meaningful. Our research and practice continues to have a major impact on corporate and government policy. The new Research Excellence Framework will be used to evaluate the quality of research in UK higher education institutions.



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Significant recognition will relate to the impact of research via demonstrable benefits to the economy, society, public policy, culture and quality of life. This is at the very heart of the science and practice of occupational psychology.

Occupational psychology adopts multiple perspectives of organisational issues and thus has a significant capacity for interdisciplinary working. For the immediate future, there is much to be gained by enhanced collaboration within psychology, providing a broader perspective in both research and practice settings.

### Antonia Dietmann

I endorse the core theme here that occupational psychology has not yet maximised its own potential; however, we seem to have differing levels of optimism. To highlight one of the more contentious points raised, on the one hand occupational psychology is apparently criticised as being a tool for management whilst on the other hand we are drawn to the growth of well-being psychology and its impact on people's working lives.

The value of constructive debate must not be underplayed; it helps draw people together and we need a critical mass. Our numbers are modest. With only approximately 4000 Division of Occupational Psychology members we are significantly smaller than other well-known organisations laying claim to our expertise. Membership equals revenue. However, for a small body, we have big ambitions. We want to be the number one provider of knowledge and expertise concerning people at work. We need to find our voice, or have we simply been barking up the wrong types of tree? Drawing upon our contributors' suggestions, we need to learn how to influence the decision makers. Those in organisations' strategic seats of power talk finance and law. Do we? Reviewing the content of the MSc Occupational Psychology might be timely.

Most of my network of practising occupational psychologists work in small psychology teams if they are lucky, but are more often lone professionals within non-psychology teams or are singleton posts – either inhouse or as freelancers or associates. It can be a tough job, not just in terms of delivering the work, but to continue to sell the benefits. They have often made incremental improvement to organisational practices – taking a step in the right direction and showing occupational psychology's commitment to long-term results. Convincing non-psychology clients of our value helps if

## The international perspective

Neil Anderson

What did British occupational psychology (OP) ever do for us? The contributions and commentaries by seven occupational psychologists in this issue make interesting, if not at times a little challenging, reading. I'm not sure that I am particularly qualified to provide 'the international view' but having just returned to the UK from almost 10 years at a Dutch university, I will try to. Having also served on various international committees and having conducted collaborative research with colleagues from a range of different countries, I do have some years of experience of their views. Is occupational psychology in the UK really entirely theoretically and empirically moribund, all of its techniques baseless fads, and its practitioners and even scientists more interested in making a quick buck than genuinely improving performance and psychological well-being in organisations? Have all of its client organisations, government departments and users therefore been collectively hoodwinked over many decades into purchasing ungrounded techniques based upon pseudo-scientific evidence?



This would certainly not chime with the view of international colleagues, it does not fit with narrative and meta-analytical summaries of the now huge research base, and it is not my own stance. Indeed, British occupational psychology is held in genuine esteem, its historical roots and contributions are well respected and widely referred to in European and American textbooks, and the contributions of eminent British researchers and practitioners over the years looked upon with real admiration. Rather, a balanced review of the evidence suggests that Rob Briner presents an outlier narrative, that the balance of scientific opinion lies well away from his personal interpretation, and that ample and robust evidence exists for the positive impacts of occupational psychology on organisations and individuals alike.

One confound is that our science and practice has become increasingly global with research teams and collaborations becoming more cross-national, especially for papers making it into the top-tier journals. So it is more difficult to talk of the unique contribution of British occupational psychology in this context. This noted, numerous reviews of the many topic areas that comprise occupational psychology have concluded generally positive effects in a whole range of areas, both upon individual, team and organisational productivity, and upon individual well-being at work. For instance, of the 43 chapters, including eight involving British authors, comprising one handbook (Anderson et al., 2001), all reach positive but cautious conclusions over the efficacy of techniques, findings and interventions.

I have argued elsewhere that one sign of a healthy knowledge-based profession is constructive reflexivity over its modes of working, efficacy of techniques, and interface between research and practice. But the key word here is constructive. Debate needs to be respectful of different perspectives, knowledgeable of the different pressures of work in either practice or scientific research, and critical exposés balanced with genuinely constructive suggestions for improvement. Practice and science in our field, but especially the latter, have become more complex, multilevel, multifaceted, theoretically driven and globalised in recent years. Notable advances in occupational psychology research have been made in numerous areas – team performance, multilevel designs, innovation and creativity, stress and health, selection and socialisation, equal opportunities, psychometric measurement and analytical techniques, career management, and leadership, to name but a few. My own view is that psychology departments, regardless of country, are far more engaging learning environments for the active inclusion of occupational psychology topics and sections. As Fiona Patterson notes, perhaps the strictures of the upcoming Research Excellence Framework will place more of a public interest premium upon the practical impacts of psychological research. The DOP is the second largest Division in the BPS yet it is telling that none of the contributors to this debate, myself included, are (now) based in psychology departments. But, it is perhaps more concerning that some now even do not feel the BPS provides their most suitable professional body for membership.

What did occupational psychology ever do for us? A substantial amount, would be the resounding reply from international colleagues. Perhaps, as the scene from Monty Python's *Life of Brian* goes ('What did the Romans ever do for us?'), we should not be too British in our critical, self-focused angst here – occupational psychology in the UK has many strengths and much to commend the impacts of its outputs to individuals and organisations alike.

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they understand the difference between a good service and a poor one. We need to educate not just our clients, but also the market place more widely, including trade and industry bodies and government. We need our consumers to be discerning. We should aim to get them demanding evidence-based practice, ethical standards and long-lasting change.

I'm an optimist; occupational psychology is an exciting profession. I agree that it 'provides an unbeatable combination of relevance and challenge' to practical problems. It is nearly 100 years old – now is the time to try something different: be bold... flash a mob or two... tweet to your heart's content (@occpyscuk)... begin the day with a blog. I encourage people to be proud of our protected title and chartered status, share the benefits of occupational psychology with wider society, publicise good work, but let's stick together. It's only as a collective that we will have sufficient decibels to be heard. Being outward-focused should not stop us from being inward-looking and reflective; we should continue to improve our identity and build on our value as an applied science.

Gandhi said 'Be the change you want to see' – so come on, let's do it...

### Catherine Cassell

There may be challenges, but there is also a lot right with contemporary occupational psychology. I have worked in academic occupational psychology for over 20 years and have seen the discipline develop to reflect contemporary workplace issues. For example, job design research has changed to incorporate issues about designing environmentally friendly – as well as people-friendly – work environments. Occupational psychologists have demonstrated their ability to move with the times and focus upon the issues that the contemporary workplace faces. Like many other academic occupational psychologists, I have found my home in a business school rather than a university psychology department. Other contributors have highlighted the exodus of occupational psychologists to business schools as an issue for concern. I see it somewhat differently.

Business schools are clearly different environments from a traditional university department, and some of the stereotypes held about occupational psychologists outlined earlier are similar to those sometimes held about business schools. The business school tends to be one of the biggest endeavours of any

university and a key source of university revenue generation. My experience is that the distinctive skills of occupational psychologists are recognised and valued in a business school environment. The future managers and business graduates we encounter want to know about work psychology and our modules are always popular.

Similarly, we have lots we can learn. Importantly a business school environment enables us to pursue a multidisciplinary understanding of the key topics of work psychology. We can retain our disciplinary base and our values about employee well-being and psychological health, whilst working alongside colleagues in human resource management, accounting and finance, marketing, international business, and so on, enhancing our understanding of the complexities of organisational life within which psychological interventions take place. Within a multidisciplinary environment methodological diversity is welcomed. Indeed the lack of methodological diversity in work psychology is something that Gillian Symon and I have been trying to address within our field for many years.

In the business school, psychologists take an active role in training the managers of the future, which, in an increasingly globalised world, means engagement with students from many different countries and backgrounds, unconstrained by the demands of the British Psychological Society's Graduate Basis for Chartered Membership. Here our understanding of psychological issues in the workplace can be researched, applied and valued. Finally, Rob Briner talked earlier about evidence-based practice. Like motherhood and apple pie, who could possibly argue against it? But a cursory look at the debate that has taken place within the management research literature about this during the last 10 years highlights the woeful way in which academics have failed to critique the contested nature of 'evidence'. My concern is that this leads to just another way of standardising the nature of research providing a universal gold



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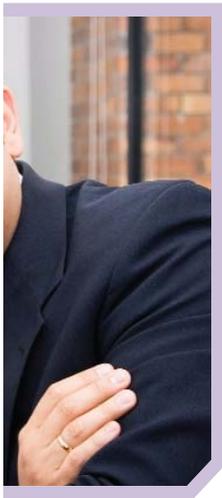
standard of systematic review. This constrains the potential for methodological plurality in the discipline and provides yet another stick for us to beat anyone with whose research or practice we don't think complies.

### Eugene Burke

Is the glass half full or half empty? I'll choose half full and to engage in this discussion from the perspective of value and values. I'll start with value.

In my mind, the value of psychology to the world of work continues to increase. Organisations, public and private, know that their people are the key drivers of outcomes and value but, as I experienced on an INSEAD programme a few years ago, they are keen to learn how to address people issues. In the Great Stabilisation (as the *Economist* has referred to this period), organisations want to know what their capabilities are and what their people risks are, whether that be recruitment, training and development or retention.

Yes, there are myriads of 'consultancies' offering help with these problems, but what distinguishes us, as occupational psychologists is that we have content, evidence and, which gets attention, science (for my commitment to science in practice please visit [tinyurl.com/shlprinciples](http://tinyurl.com/shlprinciples)). What organisations also want is measurement that is relevant, reliable and meaningful. That is just part of the value proposition that occupational psychology offers. But, you can't have value unless you have metrics to show that value is being created, and that value will not be appreciated unless it is clearly communicated to an audience that may know little of statistics, let alone



psychology. Here, I think we do have a challenge which I will come back to later.

Is occupational psychology valued by academia? The other commentaries suggest that, here, the glass may be half empty, but what are academics doing to encourage the sharing of the applied research that we, in the field, are doing every day with organisations? There are scientists, and they are not all

in academic departments, and there are practitioners who promote good science (witness John Mahoney-Phillips' talk at the last Division of Occupational Psychology conference), but they need to have a clear proposition to sell into their organisations to win the time and space against other priorities and pressures. And what can we, as a profession, do to surface and share the knowledge capital that we are all creating? Let me be blunt: I do not think an annual conference is the answer.

I'll now move to values, something we should know about, and suggest that the scientist-practitioner debate is largely down to a difference in values. Those who move into practice probably do value the rewards that practice can offer and a direct engagement with clients. Academics probably do value the exploration of ideas for their own sake, and creating knowledge rather than just its dissemination (although I like to think my role combines both to create the value that occasionally buys me that new suit).

As such, we, the scientist and the practitioner, may have chosen different paths, but I think we all share a common goal: how to communicate our value in terms of good science and effective practice.

Now, I'd like to think that we know something about effective communication too. On that note, let me end with a quote from Charles Mingus, the jazz great: 'Making the simple complex, that's commonplace. Making the complex simple – awesomely simple – that's creativity.'

### Binna Kandola

'The numbers of occupational psychologists will increase significantly

over the next few years to match those in clinical and educational psychology.' So spoke the course tutor on the first day of my master's course... in 1979. Whilst he was a great researcher and lecturer his powers of prophecy clearly left a lot to be desired. The numbers of universities now teaching occupational psychology has increased but the number of jobs available has never equalled the numbers of postgraduates being produced. The recession has left its mark, and it is not difficult to imagine senior management in organisations looking to make cuts saying 'What on earth are we doing employing them?'

The profession is at a critical juncture, and if we are not careful we may not only be marginalised further but even squeezed out of the workplace altogether. Why this is happening is due partly to the way we are perceived and partly to the way we are structured, and it is partly self-inflicted.

Occupational psychology has a lot to offer employees and employers in a wide range of areas, for example: motivation, teamwork, leadership, well-being. Unfortunately we are seen as primarily assessment experts – specialists who help design and implement selection systems. I can't help feeling that if we continue in this way soon we may be seen not even as experts but as technicians, with little to offer but the application and interpretation of psychometric tests.

Structurally it is difficult to know where we fit any more. The Health Professions Council (HPC) seems relevant for many psychologists, but I struggle to see what it has to offer occupational psychologists. So even within the governance structures the needs of occupational psychologists seem to have been neglected. Does this bother me? Probably not, but it reflects the difficulty of making our voice heard. Then again, unlike other areas of psychology we are not a unified group. Occupational psychologists are employed in a range of organisations and are often independent practitioners. Our professional friends and acquaintances could also be our direct competitors, and getting unity under these conditions isn't easy.

But we also don't make life easier for ourselves. I come across too many occupational psychologists who view our discipline as 'too academic', a criticism that is applied to journals, courses and conferences. The one advantage that occupational psychology has over the other professions that work in related fields to ours is that we have a scientific base on which to build our solutions. To reject this as too academic is to dismiss

the one thing that gives us legitimacy in the first place. If the first two areas, perception and structure, are to a certain extent beyond the control of any individual psychologist or organisation, this one – utilising the substantial body of research that exists – is something that all of us can do.

### Ivan Robertson

It's been really interesting to read the comments of my colleagues on occupational psychology – by the way I'm using that term because it's the one used by the BPS. I don't think it's a particularly good way of labelling what we do.

I'm going to take the opportunity of my second contribution to comment on some of the points that stood out for me when I read the comments of others.

First, there's the issue of stereotyped views of occupational psychology and occupational psychologists mentioned by both Rob and Fiona. Suits, cars, money, lack of interest in science, questionable relevance to the lives and well-being of people and the organisations they work in. From my time working in universities I know quite a lot of scientists and practitioners who work in various fields. There are plenty of engineers, medics and biological scientists who wear suits, drive fancy cars, earn lots of money and sometimes appear impatient with questions about the evidence base for what they do. We are no better or worse than other professions with a science and practitioner community. It's just that the other professions are grown up enough not to make stupid and naive assumptions – such as, if someone gets paid for working with a client all they care about is money and they will happily jump on the latest bandwagon and use it to rip the client off at the earliest opportunity! That's not how I see myself or the people I work with.

A second issue is the migration of academic occupational psychologists to business schools. Like Catherine, I see business schools as a good home for occupational psychologists. When I mentioned this trend in my first contribution, my point was that occupational psychology needs to maintain the connection with other areas of psychology. The reason for this is linked to another point raised by both Eugene and Binna – that the unique contribution of psychologists, compared with many other professionals who work on people issues in organisations, is the scientific basis of our discipline. I think that is a really important point. If we lose the connection with science and the work

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done in other areas of psychology, we lose the heart of our profession. So, if we end up with all occupational psychology academics being located in business schools and none in psychology departments, we need to work hard to avoid becoming the kind of isolated, unscientific, uncritical and irrelevant discipline that Rob seems to feel we are half way towards already.

Finally, like Binna, I'm concerned about the professional context that we work in – i.e. the HPC. I am not a health professional, I don't want to be a health professional and I don't want clients or members of the public to see me as that. At the moment I don't know what to do about this striking mismatch between the professional body that I have been forced to join and my actual professional activities. What's the solution? I really don't know, and it worries me. It worries me more than any of the other issues raised in this series of comments. The BPS has let me down completely, the HPC is not for me – and I don't see the Association of Business Psychologists as a viable alternative. We really need to tackle this before it's too late.

### Binna Kandola

Gosh! I have always thought that the academic-practitioner divide referred to the lack of common ground between the two groups. This is due, I thought, to different orientations and expectations. I have also taken the view that the divide was made worse by practitioners not engaging enough with academia and forgetting the very basis of our discipline.

Unfortunately, having read the

contributions, I now get the sense that the divide is also about a lack of respect, with some in academia having a barely concealed contempt for those of us in practice. Our work is management oriented, faddish and lacking any evidence as to its effectiveness. Or to put it another way: unprincipled and lacking integrity.

There is of course a degree of cynicism here; universities are happy to cash in on the increased interest in occupational psychology whilst at the same time bemoaning what they are churning out.

It is this lack of mutual understanding that could be at the heart of the divide, and maybe we should be more honest in being prepared to discuss it.

### Rob Briner

Sorry for the irritation my views have caused. I was going to bring up that thing about how irritation stimulates the production of pearls. But no, it doesn't work here. My initial point was about how other psychologists see us (psychometric tests, suits and nice cars). This perception reflects the relatively narrow technical focus of our work (also pointed out by others) and its commercial orientation.

Ivan says that other professions (though I sense he means other individuals apart from me) are 'grown up enough not to make stupid and naive assumptions' that if people are paid by clients all they care about is money and jumping on bandwagons. These are certainly not my assumptions – practitioners care about other things too.

But, if the paying customers rather than knowledge shape what is practised, conflicts of interest will occur. Is this a stupid and naive observation? As put to me recently by a practising occupational psychologist, 'A lot of this [fads and bandwagons] happens because clients demand the latest thing, whether it's good or bad. If we don't deliver it, someone else will.'

While we may be 'no better or worse than other professions,' as Ivan suggests, should this be the limit of our ambition? To be no better or worse? And, when it comes to evidence, we are clearly much, much worse than some other professions and some other psychologists. The medical profession, for example, has made great efforts to become more evidence-based and questions the role of commercialisation and fads. There is little sign of evidence-based approaches to practice in occupational psychology (Briner, 1998).

It is clear that occupational psychology adopts techniques that have little, mixed or contested, empirical support. This is rarely discussed (reflecting a point made by Binna). One notable exception is the recent series discussing topics such as identification of discrimination, executive coaching, employee engagement, executive selection and leadership development in the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology's journal *Industrial and Organizational Psychology: Perspectives on Science and Practice*. This has shown the limited nature of the knowledge underlying our practice. If you want to know more about evidence-based I-O psychology and join in the discussion see Briner & Rousseau (in press).

I note with surprise and more than a hint of sadness that Binna feels some academics have 'a barely concealed contempt' for practitioners. I'm surprised because I assume we all know this is about the issues – not the people expressing them. But discussions of the academic-practitioner 'divide' do almost inevitably seem to become over-personified, and this is part of the problem. The 'divide' is not about roles or job titles or individuals, but simply about whether or not we take evidence seriously in our work and what that means. Any commercial activity that claims to be based on science faces exactly the same dilemmas. The sadness is because I do not believe that academics have contempt for practitioners. I may not like some of the things practitioners do, but that's completely different. After all, some of my best friends are occupational psychologists.



Irritation does not always produce pearls