



# Part I

# Introduction to work and Occupational Psychology





# 1 What is Occupational Psychology?

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## Learning outcomes

On completion of this chapter you should:

- have an overview of the history of Occupational Psychology in the UK;
- understand the key changes that have taken place in the work environment over the 20th century and into the 21st century;
- understand what Occupational Psychology is today, with an overview of the broad areas covered;
- appreciate how Occupational Psychology differs from other areas, such as human resources and management consultancy.

## Introduction

The area of applied psychology relating to people at work and in organisations has a number of different labels. Within the UK we generally tend to use the term *Occupational Psychology*. This is the official title and is protected by law. However, you may also come across the labels *Organisational Psychology*, *Business Psychology* or *Work Psychology*. Elsewhere, such as in Europe, it is common convention to use the term *Work Psychology*; while in the USA, it is commonly labelled *Industrial and Organisational Psychology* (or *I/O Psychology*).

So, what is Occupational Psychology? Broadly speaking, it is the branch of applied psychology concerned with human behaviour in work and organisational settings. As defined by the British Psychological Society (BPS), Occupational Psychology is about *applying the science of psychology to people at work*; where work is generally considered to be paid employment. That said, some researchers and

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practitioners have increasingly been exploring the links between work and non-work, such as the increasing blurring of boundaries between work and non-work hours (Brough and O'Driscoll, 2010).

In this chapter, we first explore the history of Occupational Psychology from its inception during the early part of the 20th century, through to modern day Occupational Psychology. Next, we consider some ways in which the work environment has changed during the latter part of the 20th century and the early 21st century, and the influence this might have had on Occupational Psychology. Finally we consider some key ways in which Occupational Psychology might differ from other, seemingly similar, areas.

### A brief history of Occupational Psychology

The following sub-sections outline the history of Occupational Psychology. You may question why you need to know about the history of our profession; the answer is that to understand contemporary Occupational Psychology, it helps to know how we got here. This brief account of the history of Occupational Psychology is by no means an exhaustive historical account, but instead draws out some of the key developments in and changes to the profession over the previous one hundred years or so. Our aim is that you, as a student, will understand the context of where we are today in Occupational Psychology, by understanding the history of the profession. It may surprise you to see that much of what we think of as 'contemporary' issues in Occupational Psychology were discussed and researched in the early 1900s.

### Occupational Psychology: the early years

It was as early as 1915 in the UK, during the First World War, when applied psychology studies began: for example, investigating industrial fatigue and the factors influencing health and efficiency of workers in munitions factories. These studies were conducted by the Industrial Health Research Board (IHRB) and in the 1930s the IHRB reported on topics such as hours of work, industrial accidents, vision and lighting, vocational guidance and selection, time and motion study, and methods of work and posture. Although, as Shimmin and Wallis (1994) note, these research studies did not attract a huge amount of interest, and so many of these reports were soon out of print. Unfortunately, the IHRB did little to publicise its research and it was rarely presented to those who might have been able to use the results.

In 1921 a key institution in the history of Occupational Psychology was founded by Charles Myers (considered one of the most significant British psychologists from this time) and Henry Welch, an important industrialist (Kwiatkowski et al., 2006). This was the National Institute of Industrial Psychology (NIIP) and its primary aim was to 'promote and encourage the application of the sciences of psychology and

physiology to commerce and industry by any means that may be found practicable' (Shimmin and Wallis, 1994: 4). The NIIP was conceived to bring practical psychology to industry and it was run as a not-for-profit scientific association. Thus it was dependent on fees earned for diagnostic investigations and work carried out for firms to improve their working conditions and performance. By 1930, many organisations were associated with the NIIP, such as the Bank of England, the Rockefeller Fund, the City of London Corporation, Lloyds Bank and many others (Kwiatkowski et al., 2006). At the time, the NIIP was well known and considered to be extremely influential.

So for a time, in the UK there were two main bodies (the NIIP and IHRB) conducting research and practice in the area we now know as Occupational Psychology. The work conducted by the NIIP during the 1930s was equally as diverse as that conducted by the IHRB, focusing on issues such as job analysis, psychological testing, interviewing and personnel selection, paving the way for much of contemporary thinking (Kwiatkowski et al., 2006). For example, what Occupational Psychologists currently refer to as emotional intelligence or 'EQ' (Goleman, 1998) was explored over 80 years ago within the concepts of mood, emotion and temperament (Myers, 1920); what we currently refer to as 'culture' in an organisation was then explored using the term 'atmosphere' (Miles, 1928). The concept of 'work-life balance' was explored as early as 1937 (Myers, 1937); and from a methodological perspective, the use of work samples and diary study research methods were also being explored at this time (Wyatt and Western, 1920). However, since the NIIP gave guidance to fee-paying individuals or organisations, the participants in their research came largely from professional backgrounds. Other research on broader, more diverse, populations was generally in association with the IHRB (Frisby, 1970).

Yet the socio-economic challenges of 1930s were such that the results of these pioneering studies became obscured. After 1921 the post-war boom diminished: many firms were struggling to survive; many people were out of work, and since there was no welfare state there were no interventions to alleviate the hardship. Additionally, the industrial regions of the country, such as the centres of coal-mining, shipbuilding, iron and steel, were badly affected and increasingly became depressed areas. Given such an unfavourable situation it is perhaps somewhat remarkable that British industrial psychologists survived, especially considering their reliance on consultancy work (Rose, 1975).

## The Second World War years

It is notable that the expansion of Occupational Psychology after the Second World War may not have happened at all had it not been for pioneers working in bodies such as the NIIP (Hearnshaw, 1964). Nevertheless, it was during the Second World War (1939–45) that selection procedures in the military were transformed and War Office Selection boards were set up. By the end of the war, three million recruits into the Army, Navy and the Air Force had been through at least a partial psychological assessment procedure, and around two million men and women had

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experienced a battery of tests on intellectual and educational abilities. Additionally, many recruits were also interviewed and assessed on biographical data along with these test scores. Vernon and Parry (1949) outline in detail the process and outcomes of psychological assessment and selection in the three services, and this is considered to be one of the earliest technical accounts of the application of differential psychology on a large scale in the UK, which included follow-up data to demonstrate effectiveness (Shimmin and Wallis, 1994). Indeed, the success of the psychologists working within the services was recognised by an Expert Committee report that recommended psychologists should be represented on scientific, advisory and other committees concerned with personnel (Shimmin and Wallis, 1994). This endorsement signified a great achievement by psychologists.

Meanwhile, the Cambridge Psychological Laboratory began work on human skill and performance, which had a lasting influence on applied psychology and the emerging field of ergonomics, in particular the study of acquisition of skills and human-machine interaction at work. A distinguishing feature of the work conducted at Cambridge was its theory-drive approach, as opposed to the somewhat pragmatic approach of personnel selection within the services (Shimmin and Wallis, 1994).

### Post-war psychology in the government

Since psychology had been successfully applied to wartime problems, conditions were favourable for it to be applied during peacetime. Life in the years following the Second World War was dominated by its consequences: the newly elected Labour administration was embarking on national reconstruction while facing human, technical and economic problems (Marwick, 1982). There were difficulties integrating ex-service personnel into civilian life, combined with the threat of the Cold War; this meant that in addition to civil reconstruction there was a need to sustain the military forces.

However, applied psychology was recognised as having the potential to help tackle these problems, and this had far reaching consequences for the development of the area of Occupational Psychology in the post-war years and the subsequent decades. Particularly influential was the establishment of psychologists practising within government; although, given the constraints of security (the Official Secrets Act), much of the work conducted within the government by these psychologists was not widely disseminated (Shimmin and Wallis, 1994). Nevertheless, many of the activities of the government psychologists paved the way for what we see as Occupational Psychology today. For example, the foundations of the modern-day assessment centre were laid by psychologists working in government, based on the British War Office Selection Boards (Murray, 1990). Refinements of the assessment centre method were made by the Civil Service Selection Board (documented in some publications, such as Jones et al., 1991). Indeed, one consequence of assessment centres being used within government departments was that this provided large data-sets of psychological measures and assessments, along with selection decisions and

follow-up information. Since psychologists were able to show the benefits of assessment centres, they were soon taken up by other bodies and organisations.

Another significant development in the civil service was that in 1950 a separate job category of 'Psychologist' was established. This provided the opportunity of a professional career for people wanting to specialise in applying occupational, experimental or social psychology in the workplace. From the outset, this attracted many applicants, although they were not required to have any higher degree nor were they required, ironically, to go through a rigorous selection process (Shimmin and Wallis, 1994).

Psychology was also applied to civilian employment and training through the central department responsible for national employment policies. Initially the department was known as the Ministry of Labour, but in 1967 it was rebranded as the Department of Employment and Productivity with powers of intervention in aspects of employment, vocational training and industrial relations. The first Ministry of Labour psychologists worked in employment rehabilitation units, which were originally established to enable the return to work of people who had suffered disabling industrial accidents. These psychologists were the first in the UK to participate in a nationwide service offering support to disadvantaged people. This support mostly involved personal assessment and vocational guidance, but by 1968 over 12,000 injured or disabled people had been helped to gain employment (Shimmin and Wallis, 1994). The Ministry also allocated some psychologists to give professional support to vocational and career guidance staff who gave advice to school leavers, through what was then named the Youth Employment Service (later known as the Careers Service). They were able to provide important advice, in particular in evaluating the assessment methods used to identify occupational interests and preferences.

## Post-war research and application in industry

Alongside the developments of Occupational Psychology within the government, there was also an expansion of industrial field studies and other research designed to help British industry adapt in a rapidly changing world. These changes included both the technological advancements made during the war, which led to new jobs and new forms of communication, and also changes in people's expectations and aspirations (Shimmin and Wallis, 1994). The post-war era also witnessed significant changes in the composition of the labour force. There was increasing participation by married women working on both full- and part-time bases, and also by immigrant workers from the former UK colonies, for whom jobs became available due to labour shortages in some industries, such as textiles.

Initially during the 1950s, recovery from the war and the adaptation to changed social economic and political conditions dominated. This was followed by reasonable prosperity as new production techniques reduced the prices of consumer goods and made higher wages possible (Marwick, 1982). In fact, the year 1957 marked the time when post-war restrictions and controls finally came to an end and the word 'affluence' made its way into common language (Marwick, 1982).

Into the early 1960s there were changing attitudes and behaviours. Within social welfare, education, employment and industry there seemed to be optimism about the possibilities and benefits of planned interventions and improvements, such as 'planned organisational change' which later became known as organisational development (Shimmin and Wallis, 1994). Taken as a whole then, the 1960s were a period of change in the emphasis and balance of the activities of Occupational Psychologists: there was continuing work in personnel selection and vocational guidance, ergonomics and training. However, many of these developments in Occupational Psychology throughout the 1960s were not published. This was in direct contrast to other branches of psychology where the research was published to a great extent. As Nelson (1971) points out, this is because much of the work conducted by Occupational Psychologists within organisations was not actually released for publication and, similarly, work conducted by consultancy firms was generally kept confidential; added to this, access to the work conducted within the armed services or civil service was restricted.

There were significant changes in the Occupational Psychology *profession* during this time too. The constitution of the NIIP was altered in 1951, while under the directorship of Frisby, to 'encourage and develop the science of industrial and Occupational Psychology' (Kwiatkowski et al., 2006: 185): the concept of the 'practical application' had been dropped and the focus was on science instead. The NIIP also briefly attempted to compete with the better resourced universities by seeking status as an industrial research association in 1956; and it also continued competing with the more commercially aware consultancies. However, it is claimed (Kwiatkowski et al., 2006) that along the way the NIIP lost its energy and impetus and eventually in 1977 it was closed down. Guest (2006) suggests that, by its end, it was a troubled organisation that was badly run, struggling to find the funds to survive.

Another establishment important in the history of Occupational Psychology is the Tavistock Institute, which was set up after the Second World War in 1946. Although the Institute's emphasis was more clinical psychology than occupational (Guest, 2006), it nevertheless had a major influence on thinking in the field of Occupational Psychology. For example, through debates on job design and the quality of working life (Emery and Thorsrud, 1976), the Institute affected industry and government policy. The Tavistock's approaches had a theoretical underpinning, providing a strong intellectual basis for their work. Indeed, their work provided the basis for systems thinking, the result of the Tavistock's previous coal-mining studies (Trist et al., 1963). This led to the theory of organisations as open, socio-technical systems, representing one of the first multi-level frameworks for considering individuals, groups and organisations. Other systems thinking included the organisational development movement and the rationale underlying action research. All these ideas and theories have been very influential and widely disseminated. Indeed, a key feature of the work by the Tavistock Institute is that it is evidence-based, engaging academia and practice through the use of relevant theory and evidence (Guest, 2006).

By the 1970s, the UK saw an increase in strike activity in both public and private sectors at the same time as the industrial base shrank. There was rising inflation,



increased unemployment and a struggle to compete in world markets against Europe and the Far East (Marwick, 1982). Later, there was a short 'boom' in the 1980s, particularly in the financial, technology and service sectors, during which the government sought to cut costs and contain borrowing. This meant that, for organisations that depended on government funding, such as universities, research councils and hospitals, there was a tremendous squeeze on resources. In general, the 1980s were a period of great social and economic change, which saw companies in the UK relocating their manufacturing overseas to countries such as Thailand, Malaysia and Mexico, and expanding into new market economies in Eastern Europe following the collapse of communism. The UK experienced rapid economic growth, in part due to its adoption of *laissez-faire* economic policies.

During the 1980s, the economic and organisational landscape in the UK was such that it led to increased opportunities for Occupational Psychologists, particularly through consultancy activities. Many of the well known Occupational Psychology consultancies were founded, developed and expanded during this time. In 1984, Peter Saville (then a founding partner of Saville and Holdsworth Limited SHL) published the Occupational Personality Questionnaire (OPQ).

Also in the 1980s the term *Occupational Health Psychology* (OHP) was coined, which emerged out of health psychology, occupational/organisational psychology and occupational health. OHP is concerned with the workplace characteristics that influence the development of physical and mental health-related issues in employees. The field advanced in 1987 when the journal *Work & Stress* was founded and later, in 1999, the European Academy of Occupational Health Psychology (EA-OHP) was established.

The 1990s may be characterised as the *Information Age*. It was during this decade that many technologies became available and commonly used by the general public. This resulted in the ability of people to transfer information freely and instantly, and to have access to knowledge that might have previously been unavailable or difficult to find. This expansion of information may have been due to a combination of factors, including globalisation and widespread use of new media such as the Internet (Patterson, 2001). It was also during the 1990s that the terms *war for talent* and *talent management* were established (Michaels et al., 2001). With shortages in some labour markets, organisations increasingly recognised that there was increasing competition among companies to recruit and then retain competent employees: a war for talent (Lievens et al., 2002).

We end our formal historical section here, since the continuing evolution of theory and practice in Occupational Psychology will be picked up in the chapters that follow in Part II. Each of these chapters will focus on a more specific area of Occupational Psychology (for example, employee selection, organisational development and change), so you will be able to understand how that specific area has evolved and is developing today. Additionally, in Part III we discuss some contemporary concerns and emerging trends in the workplace, including issues such as the recent global recession, globalisation and so forth. Before we move on, we leave with some general points about how Occupational Psychology has changed since its beginnings.

## The changing nature of Occupational Psychology

From its inception, Occupational Psychology (or what was then termed industrial psychology) was mainly about the study of individual differences (Shimmin and Wallis, 1994). The emphasis was on investigating and explaining attributes that relate to performance at work, such as a person's ability, skills, traits and personality. The concept of individual difference is what underpins work in selection, assessment and vocational guidance since the individual is focused on as the main unit of analysis. Despite the fact that initial research conducted by the IHRB and the NIIP explored the influence that working conditions had on people at work (with such observations leading researchers to adopt more social psychological perspectives), students in the 1940s were trained to be scientists and thus approached the study of human behaviour using a positivist, classic, scientific paradigm (Shimmin and Wallis, 1994). The methodology in Occupational Psychology therefore emulated the natural sciences, which aimed to describe and explain various phenomena in a way that would allow generalisations to be made. This assumes well-defined problems, the ability to control variables and measurements, all with objectivity and scientific detachment. Further work on individual differences was later expanded through the development and refinement of factor analytic models of personality during the 1950s.

Thus for the most part, the formulation of solutions in Occupational Psychology were for a while focused on the individual as the unit of analysis, based on an individual's performance, but measured in isolation from their working environment. Increasingly, from the early 1960s, the potential limitations of the view of scientific detachment and objectivity were more widely recognised. There was an influx of ideas from social psychology and interventionist approaches began to come into prominence (such as action research [Lewin, 1954]). So, there has been a shift of approach in Occupational Psychology during the 20th century: from a focus on the individual in his or her job role where the employing organisation was taken as given, to an approach that accounts for the organisation as a whole and considers the wider social, economic and political environment in which it functions. Some of these changes are reflected in the ways in which the work environment has changed over this time.

We now turn to a brief overview of some of the key changes that have taken place in the workplace and consider some of the research and practice in Occupational Psychology that has taken place as a result of these changes.

## Key changes to the work environment

There have been a number of significant changes to the work environment in the past few decades and these have significantly influenced the context in which people work. Changes such as the increasing globalisation of business, the Internet revolution and the rapid pace of change have impacted the way in which individuals work (Cascio and Aguinis, 2008). Organisations may be increasingly relying on team working and contract workers, while rapidly changing work roles require flexibility, adaptability and innovation (Herriot and Anderson, 1997). The following sections outline some of the key ways in which the work environment has changed.

## Technology

Over the preceding hundred years or so there have been significant and rapid changes in technology. Sparked by new technologies and, in particular, the Internet, organisations have undergone far-reaching transformations (Cascio and Aguinis, 2008). This has led to considerable changes in job content, with very few roles untouched by electronic technologies (Patterson, 2001). Across different industries and sectors some job roles have increased in complexity while for others the result has been a redundancy of some skills. For example, in manufacturing firms machines and robots have replaced jobs that may previously have been done by humans; this can lead to employees becoming equipment monitors rather than technical experts (Patterson, 2001).

Millions of workers use computers every day along with other aspects of the digital age – email, mobile phones, the Internet and so on. This is enhancing the opportunity to share vast amounts of digital information and to gain access to this information from anywhere at any time. As the use of technology has increased, so has the occurrence of telecommuting (where individuals can work from home via a computer and the Internet, rather than being physically present in an office [Gajendran and Harrison, 2007]), or the creation of ‘virtual’ teams of people or offices. It has been pointed out by Cascio and Aguinis that the increasing use of remote access and mobile technology to work ‘on-the-go’ or at home means that:

the twenty-first-century organisation must adapt itself to management via the Web. It must be predicated on constant change, not stability; organised around networks, not rigid hierarchies; built on shifting partnerships and alliances, not self-sufficiency; and constructed on technological advantages, not bricks and mortar. (2008: 135)

As a result of many of these technological changes, there has been an increase in research focusing on user-friendly equipment and operations systems (see Chapter 11, 'Automation and human-machine interaction', for further research in this area), developing training methods to develop new skills (see Chapter 10, 'Training') and redundancy counselling for those displaced from jobs because of technological developments and change (see Chapter 5, 'Counselling and personal development').

### Changes in patterns of working

With the birth of new technologies there has been an increasing change in patterns of working, including the possibility of job sharing and flexible working (Patterson, 2001). Along with this, there has been an erosion of the working week: many employees are expected to continuously monitor and respond to email via mobile devices, which may lead to an inability to disengage from work.

Furthermore, since the 1980s, organisations have sought to reduce employee numbers, increasingly relying on outsourcing contracts and/or relying on temporary or semi-permanent staff. While this might reduce employment and staffing costs within organisations, there may be less tangible losses, such as reduced organisational commitment and job satisfaction (Rousseau, 2001). The number of people in self-employment has also increased significantly, and the concept of the portfolio worker has emerged, where an individual often works for more than one company at a time on specific projects. This is known as the 'portfolio approach' (Bradley et al., 2000).

Generally, working hours have increased in most occupations (Sparks et al., 2001). This is often due to employer demands for greater flexibility of work schedules to cover extending opening hours. This has resulted in longer working hours for most employees and the decay of the working week. Being able to effectively manage work and non-work demands can significantly influence employees' health and performance. All these changes in the patterns of working have resulted in an increased interest in the possible physical and psychological effects of working anti-social hours and shift-working patterns. Within the last decade in particular there has been an explosion in work-life balance research (Brough and O' Driscoll, 2010). Indeed, research suggests that extended working hours actually have a negative effect on employees in terms of fatigue and reduced performance (Poissonnet and Veron, 2000).

### Alteration of labour force and globalisation

The labour force in the UK today looks dramatically different to how it did just a few decades ago. There have been considerable demographic changes in the

workforce, with a significant increase in the numbers of women, ethnic minority groups and older workers. These changes have resulted in research and action by psychologists relating to the implementation of equality legislation and issues faced by workers (often women) in relation to combining work and home responsibilities.

Since the 1970s legislation has changed to protect certain workers in the workforce. It is unlawful to discriminate against people on the grounds of gender, ethnicity, disability and so on. Discrimination occurs where a person who is a member of a particular group is treated less favourably than a person not in that group as a direct result of that group membership. The following pieces of legislation have been brought in since the 1970s:

- Sex Discrimination Act 1975
- Sex Discrimination (Gender Reassignment) Regulations 1999
- Race Relations Act 1976 (amended 2000 and 2003)
- Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (amended in 2005)
- Working Time Regulations 1998
- Part-time Workers Regulations 2000
- Fixed-term Employees Regulations 2002
- Employment Equality (Sexual Orientation) Regulations 2003
- Employment Equality (Religion or Belief) Regulations 2003
- Equality Act 2010 (described in more detail below)
- Agency Worker Regulations 2010

In October 2010, the Equality Act 2010 became law. This replaces most of the previous legislation listed above, and was intended to be a law ensuring consistency and fairness within the workplace. In addition to this the public sector Equality Duty came into force in April 2011. This Duty applies to public bodies and functions and surrounds the development and delivery of policies and services related to the Equality Act. The Equality Act covers the same groups that were included within existing legislation (age, disability, gender, gender reassignment, race, religion or belief, sexual orientation) but also extends some of the protections and strengthens some aspects; for instance introducing associative discrimination and disability arising from discrimination. The Agency Worker Regulations came into force in October 2011 and give agency workers (temporary and contract workers) entitlement to the same treatment as employees; that is, paid annual leave, rest breaks, national minimum wage and so on. They must complete a qualifying period of 12 weeks work in order to qualify for this regulation. The implications and ramifications of this Act are described in more detail in Chapter 4.

In addition to the legislation implemented in the UK, increasing globalisation has led to growing unification of the world's economies by reducing barriers,

such as international trade tariffs and export fees. In organisations, this has generally resulted in an increase in material wealth, goods and services through international divisions of labour. As the world of work brings together many different cultures and nationalities, it has been important for Occupational Psychologists to examine how this might impact the work environment. The tendency in many workplaces in the UK is that many different cultures are brought together, either physically in offices, or virtually (think for example of UK-based organisations that outsource call centre operations to India). The challenge then becomes one of developing human resource systems (such as selection, training, motivation) that are compatible with many different cultures and ethnicities (Landy and Conte, 2009). It seems that being part of a multicultural environment is just one aspect of working and living in the 21st century. In your working life, it is extremely likely that you will work with co-workers, managers or those you must directly report to who have different cultural values and beliefs to your own.

### Changes to organisational structure

Recent years have witnessed some significant changes in organisational structures. On the one hand, there has been a focus, since the 1980s, on downsizing and de-layering in organisations, with redundancies on a large scale; while on the other hand some organisations have become much more complex due to mergers and acquisitions. A further transformation in today's workplace is the number of small- to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs, classified as having less than 250 employees) that have emerged over the previous two decades (Anderson et al., 2004; Wyatt et al., 2010). It has been estimated that in the UK, over 99% of organisations may be classified as small or medium and account for over one-half of private-sector employment and turnover (BERR, 2008). SMEs hold substantial value for social and economic growth in the UK. More discussion on organisational structure and culture follows in Chapter 8.

Owing to the cost-cutting and downsizing regimes of the 1980s and 1990s (and indeed, in much more recent years due to the recent economic downturn), there has been a breakdown of the old employment relationship. The concept of a 'job for life' does not generally tend to be part of young workers' careers (Loughlin and Barling, 2001). Thus, many employees now have to focus on developing their own personal career plans and portfolios to increase their marketability and employability, rather than seeing their employer as permanent. This has resulted in less employee commitment and loyalty to specific organisations and, indeed, loyalty and commitment is rewarded less in organisations (Wilkinson et al., 2001). Personal development and career theories are discussed in more detail in



Chapter 5. Similarly, employer's demands have changed: they generally emphasise employee flexibility, adaptability and innovation (Patterson, 2002) since those are the employees that embrace change and are more likely to flourish in today's turbulent organisations. Consideration of the employee–employer relationship, encompassing employer demands and employee choice, has generated substantial research focusing on the *psychological contract* (Conway and Briner, 2005; Guest, 2004; Rousseau, 2001). The psychological contract is thought to 'capture the spirit of the times' (Guest, 1998: 659) and reflects the individualising of the employment relationship. The psychological contract is discussed more fully in Chapter 4.

There has also been a new form of worker emerging – the knowledge worker (Wilkinson et al., 2001). The notion of corporate commitment has to some extent been redefined to one in which maintaining the intellectual capital of an organisation, that is the knowledge, experience and ideas of employees (Wilkinson et al., 2001) or 'corporate memory', relies on employee commitment and satisfaction.

## Contemporary Occupational Psychology

Most commentators agree that there is good reason to be optimistic about Occupational Psychology as a profession (Guest, 2006; Patterson, 2001). Taking the last few decades as a whole, there has been an increase in the opportunities for Occupational Psychologists, and these are unlikely to diminish even during the current economic downturn. The field of Occupational Psychology is flourishing, with academic and practitioner expertise having had a major influence on the way in which organisations operate, from large multinational companies to public sector organisations (Patterson, 2001). Indeed, contemporary Occupational Psychology has seen a vast growth in knowledge (Guest, 2006), the diversity of research areas and applied practice is noteworthy, which may be considered a sign of health in the field. Not only has there been growth in the field, but there has also been a growing demand for Occupational Psychology services in government and industry. Additionally, the adoption of ideas from Occupational Psychology by policymakers has resulted in the advance of evidence, theory and practice (Guest, 2006).

So, how do we know that the profession, field and demand for Occupational Psychology is growing? The BPS appointments memorandum continually lists vacancies within the field, and journals that cover Occupational Psychology topics continue to flourish, indicating that there are continuing academic developments within the field. The ever increasing areas covered by Occupational Psychology may be seen and reflected in the types of topics covered in the BPS

annual Division of Occupational Psychology (DOP) conferences. For example, in 1970, the third annual conference lasted one and a half days and papers presented were mainly on topics related to selection and industrial relations. Many years later, the 2012 conference was almost three days long and had 80 papers running in seven simultaneous streams. The range of topics was immense, including (among others) innovation, technology, environmental sustainability, risk tolerance, work–life balance, stress and well-being, candidate perspective of selection and psychological contracts. A recent addition has also been the postgraduate Occupational Psychology conference, which now runs alongside the main conference – this is primarily aimed at MSc students and those who have recently completed their studies. Membership of the DOP has continued to grow year on year, and the number of BPS accredited MSc courses offering Occupational Psychology has increased significantly from around 10 in 1990 to over 25 in 2012.

In the last decade we have also seen a proliferation of related courses focusing on the study of behaviour at work, with courses such as organisational behaviour, work psychology, business psychology and so on. Further, we are seeing Occupational Psychology (or related modules) increasingly being added to undergraduate courses, such as psychology or business management, and also into postgraduate courses such as MBA and human resource management programmes. This suggests that both the interest in, and reach of, Occupational Psychology is growing within the UK.

Occupational Psychology has had a significant influence on the world of work. In fact, many concepts developed by Occupational Psychologists, such as performance appraisals, ability tests and attitude surveys, are regularly used in organisations today. It is possible to see this via the Workplace Employee Relations Survey (Kersley et al., 2004), which is an account of the state of employee relations and working life within UK organisations. The most recent survey carried out in 2004 indicated that 42% of organisations use attitude surveys; 78% use performance appraisals; 46% use ability tests; and 19% of organisations use personality measures. In advocating the use of evidence-based research and practice, Occupational Psychologists have had an opportunity to have significant input into national and corporate policy and practice, and there are many accounts of influential work in which Occupational Psychologists have had this type of positive impact (see the following papers for examples of significantly influential work: Michie and West, 2004; Patterson et al., 2009; Silvester and Dykes, 2007).

So, what are the areas of Occupational Psychology in which research and practice take place? As outlined by the BPS, there are eight areas of Occupational



Psychology that are collectively known as the *Knowledge Dimensions*. These eight areas are:

- 1 human–machine interaction;
- 2 design of environments and work, health and safety;
- 3 personnel selection and assessment;
- 4 performance appraisal and career development;
- 5 counselling and personal development;
- 6 training;
- 7 employee relations and motivation;
- 8 organisational development and change.

As we outlined in the Preface, you will notice that this text is split into chapters with headings along similar lines. As you progress through your training as an Occupational Psychologist you will come to see that these areas are not necessarily distinct and separate areas. Indeed, you will often find significant overlap between areas; nonetheless, these distinctions will help guide your learning in this area of applied psychology.

## What is Occupational Psychology's unique selling point?

So, what is it about Occupational Psychology research and practice that makes it different and what might be considered its unique selling point (USP)? There are a number of aspects of Occupational Psychology that make it unique as a discipline and we describe these here. We have also included some quotations from key academics and practitioners in the discipline regarding their thoughts on Occupational Psychology's USP.

### **Julianne Miles, Independent Practitioner, Director of Career Psychologists**

- I think that the USP of Occupational Psychologists is the credibility derived from our professional training and our evidence-based practice. Our 'brand' is that of highly trained specialists with an in-depth understanding of people at work. This is why it is essential for us to be scientist-practitioners and to stay up to date with current behavioural science research

findings and to integrate this learning into our day-to-day work. We can also offer clients the reassurance derived from the professional standards of the BPS, in particular the code of ethics and conduct.’

**Professor Beverly Alimo-Metcalfe, Professor of Leadership, Bradford University School of Management and Group Chief Executive of Real World Group**

‘As Occupational Psychologists we have a strong commitment to conduct rigorous research to real life challenges, and to ‘make a difference’. Also, the fact that many researchers also work in the field of consultancy, and use data gathered from their experiences to form the basis of ‘ground-breaking’ research ...’

First, and perhaps most importantly, there is a *scientific basis* to Occupational Psychology. If you think back to the beginning of the chapter, you will remember that the BPS definition of Occupational Psychology is about ‘applying the science of psychology to people at work’. During your training as an Occupational Psychologist you will become familiar with key psychological models, theory and research, and these will form the basis of your work as a practitioner. That is, research is used to address problems or issues in the workplace. You will be trained to become a *scientist-practitioner* and thus it will be important that, as an Occupational Psychologist, you stay up to date with current findings in the literature so that your practice is informed by the latest research. Similarly, many researchers and academics who primarily work and carry out research in universities are also practitioners, conducting important consultancy work in organisations. This means that key links between research and practice can (and should) be maintained. In fact, it has been argued vociferously (Anderson et al., 2001; Hodgkinson et al., 2001) that the scientific evidence base underpinning our practices is the fundamental difference between Occupational Psychologists and other professionals that might also aim to enhance productivity in the workplace. Thus the scientist-practitioner model is our unique selling point.

**Professor Frank Bond, Professor of Occupational Psychology, Head of Psychology Department, Goldsmiths, University of London**

‘I might be expected to say this, as I am an academic, but I believe the single most important USP of Occupational Psychology

is its scientific foundation, and, in particular, the applied benefits that stem from sound scientific theory, in-depth analyses, and evidence-based conclusions. What we can offer over and above other disciplines is the application of the scientific theory and methods to addressing the needs of clients, whether it is in selecting a psychometrically sound test, conducting a rigorous job analysis, or examining the impact of work design on health and performance.<sup>5</sup>

**Professor Kurt Kraiger, Professor of Industrial Organisational Psychology, Colorado State University**

<sup>6</sup> I have always emphasised the role of Occupational Psychology in *conducting research to help organisations make better decisions about their human capital*. HR (as an internal function) is often driven both by legal concerns or habit – what’s been done in the past. Management consultants are too often driven by what has worked for them in the past. The Occupational Psychologist can recommend interventions based on a body of evidence or applied research in that particular company.<sup>6</sup>

During your initial training you will learn how to critically analyse and evaluate the research you come across so that you are using an *evidence-based* approach. By casting a critical eye on the research you will then be able to judge for yourself how useful a model or theory will be in a specific work context. Then, using that particular model or theory, you will learn how to diagnose problems, conduct needs assessments, formulate solutions and then evaluate the output to make sure that you are having a positive impact through the work that you do. It is important to remember that the evidence base within a particular area will grow and change according to research findings, making it important to stay informed of new research and literature.

**Professor Ivan Robertson, Professor of Organisational Psychology, Leeds University Business School and Director of Robertson Cooper Ltd**

<sup>6</sup> For me the unique selling point for Occupational Psychology rests on two pillars: the scientific basis of the discipline and the technology involved in assessing and changing human behaviour.

Psychology in general is clearly a hybrid discipline and I think it can be unhelpful to compare psychology too closely to the physical sciences. However, a key selling point for psychology is the fact that there is an evidence-base – and that this evidence grows and changes according to the findings of research. The measurement precision that psychologists can bring to bear is perhaps most easily seen in the area of psychometric testing and it is no accident that this is the largest single area of activity for professional Occupational Psychologists. Although formal psychometric measurement is useful and important the whole approach that psychologists bring to understanding, assessing and influencing behaviour represents a uniquely valuable contribution.

Another important aspect of Occupational Psychology is the *multi-level perspective* that Occupational Psychologists take in conducting research or formulating solutions in practice. From a research perspective, one of the unique aspects of Occupational Psychology is that field-based studies are often conducted using a multi-level framework, that is, the importance of individual, team and organisational factors are taken into consideration. In using good research designs, combined with sophisticated multivariate analyses and statistical modelling, Occupational Psychologists are able to work out causality between variables. This is particularly important in evaluation research so that we can establish direct links between, for example, stress management interventions and employee well-being.

It is true that much of our work in practice can, and is, done by HR professionals or management consultants – for instance, the design of selection systems, change management interventions, design of training or performance management systems to name but a few. This means that, if we list the roles that Occupational Psychologists occupy, and the interventions and projects that we undertake within organisations, the list would potentially be very similar to that of other disciplines. This can make it quite hard for clients, and for those unfamiliar with Occupational Psychology, to see where our unique place in the market lies.

From the insights above, it is clear that it may not be the *work itself* that is unique but rather *our approach* to that work – in other words how we go about addressing an issue or a need in an organisation. Where other disciplines may follow a case study or use a process that they have used in the past, we will base our work on empirical evidence and theory – and in so doing, be able to recommend the most effective methodology. This is perfectly put by Dr Maire Kerrin, Director of the Work Psychology Group:

‘I think our USP has got to be to do with the word ‘psychology’, it’s what gets people interested when we talk about our work. Our major challenge though is that HR and management consultants often do what we Occupational Psychologists do, and HR/Management consultants can talk with a lot of credibility around some of the areas in which we work. However, I really do think that one of the things that we do as Occupational Psychologists is that we can take a theory, collect data and test the theory, making links between variables and so on. Essentially we work out a hypothesis and then test it. HR and management consultants don’t do this – they often use case studies as examples of their work, whereas we are using our strong evidence base to inform our decisions.’

## Summary

This chapter started with a brief overview of the history of Occupational Psychology in the UK, finishing with some of the key changes that have taken place in the work environment into the 21st century. We then considered how the research and practice in Occupational Psychology has been impacted as a result of these changes. We briefly introduced what Occupational Psychology is today, and this will be expanded on in Chapter 2. Finally, we ended the chapter with some ideas as to the unique selling point of Occupational Psychology and how this might differentiate the area from others such as human resources and management consultancy.

## Explore further

- Shimmin, S. and Wallis, D. (1994) *Fifty years of Occupational Psychology in Britain*. Leicester: British Psychological Society. This can be downloaded from the BPS website (and is free if you are a member of the BPS): <http://www.bpsshop.org.uk/Fifty-Years-of-Occupational-Psychology-in-Britain-P1435.aspx>

### Discussion questions

- 1 What do you perceive as the most significant changes in the working environment since the middle of the last century?
- 2 Think about what working life might have been like without email and computers – in what ways would it be different? How would it be easier or harder to conduct a day-to-day job?
- 3 How would you describe the field of Occupational Psychology to a friend?

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