

Annual conference papers

EDITORIAL NOTE

We have been pleased to receive quite a number of conference papers submitted for consideration. However, many of the authors appear not to have noted our requirement that the papers should be revised from verbal presentation into an appropriate written version, so we have only been able to accept relatively few. Some cannot be published in this issue because revised versions have not been received from the authors in time.

We are pleased to be able to implement this year the plan to introduce the Conference part of this issue with a preface, contributed by a rapporteur invited by the Section and Division Committees, to review the scientific issues being discussed at the Conference (also during the informal as well as the formal sessions). As one who was prevented by last-minute illness from attending the Conference, the Editor himself has been most interested to read this preface.

Occupational psychology: A 1978 commentary

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The Occupational Psychology Annual Conference is normally the largest gathering of occupational psychologists in the UK. This year's meeting at Churchill College, Cambridge, was no exception. Two hundred and fifty-six participants had the choice of listening to 46 papers dealing with a rich variety of topics. Although such a collection of papers can only tentatively be taken as representing current interests and developments, they nevertheless help to compose a useful snapshot picture of occupational psychology today. It is now ten years since the first such conference was held. On that occasion the Division of Occupational Psychology of the British Psychological Society had not yet been formed; there was no European group of participants comparable to the 47 Dutch psychologists attending this year, and the content of the programme was largely in the traditional stream. Many changes have taken place since 1968—within the discipline, the profession, and the environment in which they operate. More change will certainly take place in the years ahead. What cues, if any, did the 1978 conference provide of possible directions for change?

One theme which was touched upon in the very first session, and which resurfaced on several subsequent occasions, was the image of occupational psychology. There was general agreement that its public image left much to be desired, and an 'instant diagnosis' favoured three main causes: it is too traditional and conservative, too theoretical, and too closely identified with management. While parts of the conference programme reinforced this stereotype of occupational psychology, other parts tended to cast doubt on this essentially non-adaptive image. Attentive participants would have noticed that speakers and listeners were not only prepared to adopt the true spirit of scientific inquiry and to question their theories and methods, but also prepared as practitioners to question their traditional roles and values. The latter was nowhere more obvious than in the two sessions on occupational psychology and the unions, and occupational psychology and the press. But there were other signs of incipient change; four of these are worth highlighting, particularly at a time when a working party of The British Psychological Society is looking into the future of occupational psychology in the UK.

First of all, there was a concern for *socially relevant issues*. A number of papers dealt with various aspects of ageing, retirement, occupational transfer, and even the transport needs of the elderly and disabled. Is this a further indication of an expanding perspective from individuals-within-organizations to individuals-within-society? This would be consistent with growing interests in the quality of working life and the social costs of work. It is perhaps primarily through these broad social issues

that trade unions may come to value the potential contributions of the occupational psychologist. Moreover, in a highly developed welfare state, issues of social concern are likely to command an increasing proportion of the research budgets of the future.

Secondly, a few papers reported studies conducted within *non-commercial* organizations, such as hospitals, government departments, and educational institutions. When one considers the number of people, the amount of money, and the problems involved in the non-commercial sector of the economy it is difficult to understand why the occupational psychologist is not more active in these areas—with the exception of the Department of Employment and related agencies. Perhaps many of these organizations are not sufficiently efficiency-minded to support the kind of research and professional skills being offered by such practitioners. Many of these organizations, for example schools, have been too small in the past to display the sort of problems which call for the expertise of occupational psychologists. Also, less obvious, but equally valid, might be the inhibition experienced by occupational psychologists in moving into organizations where clinical and educational colleagues have already established territorial rights!

Thirdly, the conference was notable for the number of papers which could be categorized as falling within the area of *organizational psychology*. There was certainly no neglect of the mainstay areas of selection, vocational guidance and training, and even ergonomics was touched on in the context of the allocation of functions between operators and computers. However, the mushrooming of organizational psychology requires some comment. The influence of the psychologist is often minimal when assessing, advising and changing individuals within organizations because of the powerful effects of situational factors. The attractiveness of applying the psychologist's analytical skills to these situational factors has therefore increased, and this has been enhanced by the all-pervasive influence of systems thinking. But there is a further reason which is not often recognized, and this is the growth of management education. While the traditional areas of occupational psychology are a vital part of education and training for personnel management, the average MBA student's needs are more likely to be met by a programme which includes a heavy dose of organizational psychology or the wider subject areas of the behavioural sciences or organizational behaviour. This new development in UK, Europe and North America has provided a stimulus to this aspect of occupational psychology, and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future. The papers at the conference which reflected activities in this area dealt with various studies of participation, work design, planned organization change, models of third-party intervention in conflict management, and the effect of human resource accounting systems upon such phenomena as power relationships.

Fourthly, and finally, the *concept of contingency* received more attention than usual. Occupational psychologists are brought up on the notion of matching people to jobs and jobs to people, and sophisticated techniques are available for measuring individual characteristics and for analysing jobs. Contingency theories based on the work of such individuals as Fiedler, Lawrence and Lorsch, and others, are reproducing the matching principle in the less developed areas of organizational psychology. More and more research is supporting the common-sense idea that the appropriateness of a given incentive, leadership style, organization climate, job design, communication network, or change strategy, depends upon situational factors. However, the psychologist and other behavioural scientists operating in these areas are still handicapped by the paucity of good diagnostic tools for understanding and measuring situational factors. This might in part explain the tendency of being solution-oriented rather than problem-oriented; life is so much easier when a participative solution, or a job-enriched programme, or autonomous work groups, can be prescribed to units displaying common symptoms of high turnover and high absenteeism. It was therefore encouraging to see that at least three speakers at the conference gave papers relating to the contingency concept.

In conclusion, the 1978 conference has provided a convenient stimulus for reflecting upon the ways in which occupational psychology may be adapting to a changing environment. The cues perceived by one participant will no doubt differ from those perceived by others, but the present author's guarded optimism for the future is based on the following observations: at least a lukewarm readiness to question roles and values, ongoing work relating to socially relevant issues, involvement in non-commercial organizations, growth of organizational psychology, and the influence of contingency frames of reference. If there is any validity in these observations, it means that we may be witnessing a gradual (and at times almost imperceptible) re-orientation of occupational psychology. Hopefully there is some food for thought here for those responsible for training and employing occupational psychologists, and for those involved in generating research programmes which will help to mould the future academic base upon which the discipline is to flourish.