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Insights from Occupational Health Psychology – What Works?

Kevin Teoh & Gail Kinman

At the annual conference of the DOP held in early January, the European Academy of Occupational Health Psychology sponsored a discussion panel that brought together three presentations discussing how research and knowledge from the field of occupational health psychology could contribute to the enhancement of worker wellbeing. This article briefly outlines the role of the Academy and its growing relationship with the DOP. It then reviews the session organised by the Academy for the recent DOP Annual Conference and the key messages arising for OP researchers and practitioners.

The European Academy of Occupational Health Psychology

The Academy functions as the European representative body for the Occupational Health Psychology (OHP) discipline. The sole purpose of the Academy is to promote the advancement of knowledge and education of the public in OHP to improve workplace health, safety and wellbeing. More specifically, OHP refers to the contribution of applied psychology to occupational health, focusing on the psychological, social and organisational aspects of occupational health issues (Cox, Baldursson, & Rial-Gonzalez, 2000). The main focus, therefore, is to create healthy workplaces in which people may produce, serve, grow, and be valued.

To accomplish this, the Academy supports research, education, and professional practice across Europe. This is achieved through various activities such as a biennial conference, academic and practitioner-oriented publications, and the provision of small grants to individuals and groups. A review of the content and speakers from 2016 Academy Conference in Athens, Greece was published in the June 2016 issue of *OP Matters* (Gervais, Kinman & McDowall, 2016). The next Academy Conference will take place from 5-7 September 2018 in Lisbon, Portugal. We also work closely with bodies such as the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work and the Society for Occupational Health Psychology in the United States. The Academy has recently forged a strong reciprocal relationship with the DOP and a Memorandum of Understanding is in development. Many members of the DOP are already working within the Academy, however, it is anticipated that this more formal collaboration between the DOP and the Academy will encourage members to work together more closely in order to develop and evaluate a range of creative, evidence-informed and pragmatic approaches to improving wellbeing at work.

Insights from OHP – What Works?

As part of this ongoing relationship, the Academy sponsored a panel discussion for the recent DOP Annual Conference titled: *“Insights from OHP – What Works?”* The session contributed to the Conference theme by drawing on insights from our collective understanding in OHP and provided information on practical tools, examples, principles and discussion on enhancing the wellbeing of employees at individual and organisational levels. More specifically, the session consisted of three short presentations that focused on how to develop effective interventions to reduce work-related stress, introduce health promotion initiatives, and enhance work-life balance as well as the factors that can influence their effectiveness.

In terms of interventions, Professor Karina Nielsen from the University of Sheffield highlighted the need to make a very complex process as simple as possible. Drawing upon her research and practical work on interventions across Europe, she explained that the process required a continual cycle of initiation, screening, action planning, implementation, and evaluation. Karina indicated that underpinning all successful interventions are three core principles: (i) participation of workers; (ii) management support; and (iii) intervention fit. The first requires employees and other key stakeholders to be actively involved in all stages to ensure ownership and maximise their feasibility and acceptability. Second, managers have a key role in driving the intervention process and improving the working conditions surrounding it. Finally, an appropriate fit between the person and the intervention is crucial, as workers can only be ready for an intervention if they have sufficient autonomy and job satisfaction and motivation to engage with the process.

The second presentation by Kevin Teoh (Birkbeck, University of London), introduced workplace health promotion, which is the combined efforts of employers, workers and society to improve the health and wellbeing of people at work. As most workers spend a significant portion of their time at work, the workplace is an important way to improve the health of society. However, although workplace health promotion can take multiple forms (e.g., nutritional advice, exercise initiatives, mindfulness training, etc.), Kevin warned that these activities need to be justified through appropriate risk assessments of the work environment. A report by the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (2012) that examined this topic provided a summary review of the evidence for these initiatives, including return-on-investment calculations providing a clear business case for workplace health initiatives to the business community. Finally, practitioners interested in workplace health promotion were introduced to the European toolkit from the European Network for Workplace Health Promotion, which provides over 400 free and readily accessible case studies and toolkits to implement WHP programmes.

The final presentation by Professor Gail Kinman (University of Bedfordshire) considered the challenges faced by individuals and organisations in maintaining a healthy work-life balance in the face of new technology that bridges the divide between work and personal life. Despite the vast amount of self-help books that aim to help people improve their work-life balance, few of these are grounded in strong research evidence. Gail highlighted the need to revisit the meaning of work-life balance and the ways in which recovery can be achieved in the face of rapidly changing working environments. The traditional perspective where work and personal life were clearly separated is obsolete, as the nature of work as well as the personal preferences of individual workers means that some want either integrated or separated boundaries, while others volley between them. Therefore, multi-level models with strong potential to inform interventions to improve recovery are needed, with particular emphasis on person-environment fit approaches that accommodate wide variation in individual needs and approaches to work. Some examples of models and tools at each level were provided.

Implications for Practice

Across the three presentations, and in the subsequent discussion, there was remarkable consistency. Underpinning the application of OHP is the need to understand the work context through appropriate risk assessments, paired with the need to actively involve managers and workers. What is needed for improving the health and wellbeing of workers are systematic models and interventions that target the individual, managers and the organisation. These interventions need to recognise the role of the individual and how they are situated within their work and intervention context.

This message naturally underpins much of occupational health psychology. As the Academy seeks to build on our relationship with the DOP, we hope this is a message that can be reemphasised both at the national and European level as we collectively strive to provide evidence-informed guidance to practitioners and organisations to improve our way of life, our work, and our working lives.

For more information on the European Academy of Occupational Health Psychology please visit <http://www.eaohp.org/> and follow us on Twitter @ea_ohp.



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