Work Psychology and Organizational Behaviour

Managing the Individual at Work

Wendy Hollway

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To Robin Lister

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1
Introduction

> Economic psychotechnics may serve certain ends of commerce and industry but whether these are the best ones is not a care with which the psychologist has to be burdened. (Munsterberg 1913: 19)

1. My Background and Reasons for Writing this Book

For nearly ten years I taught aspects of work psychology [1] in a graduate department of occupational psychology at Birkbeck College, University of London (1978–87). During the last three years there, I taught a course called 'History of Industrial Psychology' and it was through researching that history that I realized how limited and partial my understanding of work psychology had been when it lacked a historical perspective. Students, practitioners and even teachers are often ignorant of the history, reflecting the assumption of so much psychology that historical study is irrelevant because scientific study invariably leads to progress, and better applications are therefore guaranteed. I hope this book will challenge this deep-seated assumption in the students and teachers, not only of industrial, occupational and organizational psychology, but of management, business administration, personnel management and industrial relations.

The historical perspective I have used is not the usual kind: not a history of the progress of ideas through the influential figures in the subject and the improvements in practice which are the result of application. It does not assume that work psychology was a coherent discipline resulting from an objective mode of enquiry which reveals facts about people at work. I start with the premiss that the psychology of work, like other applied social sciences, is a body of knowledge which has been produced rather than discovered. The emphasis on production allows one to raise questions about the conditions of its production; about the situations in which problems are defined, by whom, with whose interests incorporated. These conditions will affect the product. Industrial psychology would not have emerged when it did, in the way it did (if at all) without the late nineteenth-century growth of mechanized production and of the size of factories in North America and Europe. This may seem obvious but this premiss changes the way that history is written. The question is changed: what

conditions have produced work psychology in its eighty-year history and with what effects?

The average psychologist, and particularly the average work psychologist, does not come across the post-structuralist theorists who helped to form my approach to the history of work psychology. There is a considerable intellectual and ideological distance separating these areas, and it is one which took me some time to travel. To explain how I came to be familiar with the work of Althusser, Foucault and psychoanalytic theorists (among others), I should go back a little further into my early career as a psychologist.

In 1968, when I started as an undergraduate psychology student at Sheffield University, radical ideas had begun to affect student culture and the more daring of my peers were demanding that R.D. Laing's work should be included on the course called 'Abnormal and Personality Psychology'. The undergraduate psychology course continued, however, in the orthodox experimental tradition; rigorous, scientific, not very applied and restricted in vision by its methods and theories. I can't have listened very well to the few lectures on industrial psychology, because I remember thinking that Hawthorne was someone who had conducted some famous experiments. I think I felt that industrial psychology was beneath my dignity: it certainly didn't coincide with my idealistic views on human liberation. I received a good honours degree, went on to do a teaching qualification and, since psychology teaching was expanding, I had no difficulty in finding a job in higher education.

For the next three years, I taught social psychology in a variety of applied, multi-disciplinary contexts. I became interested in group processes and started to facilitate experiential groups. In the mid-seventies I attended a six-week summer course at the National Training Laboratories in Bethel, Maine, USA, which had an international reputation for applying human relations principles to the management of groups. I then took a research job involved in research on group and organizational dynamics. I attended a 'Leicester Conference', organized by the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations, which used experiential methods to learn about authority and group and organizational relations from a psychoanalytic perspective. By the mid-seventies, feminism was high on the personal-political agenda for many women of my age and subculture. The steps from experiential groups to consciousness-raising groups and from critical feelings about psychology to critical social theory (including feminist theory) were not difficult in that context.

The experiential groups which I designed and led increasingly emphasized power relations and social differences, particularly gender and class. This emphasis was different from the typical human

relations approach which, by the 1970s, focused on individual change without locating people's behaviour in their social positions and social relations. In understanding group dynamics, I still find it most useful to see power relations in terms of major dimensions of social difference such as class, gender and 'race'. In organizational contexts, these interact with the formal status provided by the hierarchy as well as interacting with each other.

I moved to London at the end of a three-year research contract at Bristol University and the first job I was offered was in occupational psychology. By that time, I wanted to stay in London. The department appeared progressive and humanistic and I would be able to use experiential methods to teach group dynamics. It was the time when human relations had infiltrated to the top of what would otherwise have been a rather conventional department in the FMJ-FJM tradition ('fitting the man to the job and fitting the job to the man'; see below, section 2). Human relations and experiential group methods were soon on the wane, but the department of occupational psychology continued to be democratically managed and open to new ideas. When my interests moved on, I was able to develop courses in 'applied psychology in the Third World', 'Discrimination and Equal Opportunities', and 'History of Industrial Psychology'. By the end of 1981 I had completed a PhD thesis on identity and gender difference (not based in the work place, but on domestic relations; Hollway 1982). It was through this work, and subsequent collaboration to produce a book with like-minded academics (Henriques et al. 1984), that I continued to develop the post-structuralist and feminist strand of my academic work. Because of the character of occupational psychology, it was difficult fully to reconcile these strands.

By the time I came to research the history of industrial psychology for the Birkbeck course, I was knowledgeable about applying the historical perspective of Michel Foucault to the production of social science. Essentially this perspective does not accept the premiss that knowledge can be value free. It understands the production of knowledge by analysing the relations between knowledge, power and practice. I approach work psychology in the same way in this book. I pose three questions. How did work psychology come to be what it is? What, therefore, is it? What effects does it have? Under the last question, a secondary theme emerges: has work psychology influenced the behaviour and self-understanding of individuals at work and if so how? This is a question which arises from post-structuralism's interest in theorizing the production of the individual subject and subjectivity within the relations of power, knowledge and practice. Post-structuralism comprehensively rejects, as I do, psychology's theory of the individual (see Henriques et al. 1984), but recognizes that

neither structuralism, Foucault nor psychoanalysis has an adequate account of the production of subjectivity. I find it helpful to be empirical in addressing this abstract, theoretical question. In Henriques et al. (1984), I used my thesis data on gender difference and the production of identity in couple relationships. In my subsequent book (Hollway 1989), I applied that theory to gender difference in the production of psychology. In this book I take a detailed look at eighty years of work psychology, its relations with management practices and its production of discourses and practices about the individual at work.

2. Work Psychology and Other Labels

This book is about those areas of knowledge that focus on people in the workplace and that affect practice in work organizations. These areas cannot be subsumed under one title, because they reflect many different approaches which are often theoretically inconsistent and even contradictory. They include scientific management, industrial, occupational and social psychology, human factors, human relations and organizational behaviour. At the engineering end, ergonomics overlaps with industrial psychology. At the social end, industrial sociology overlaps with organizational behaviour. To the extent that these titles refer to knowledge about people at work, they come within my scope. My interest is not to describe the areas of knowledge in themselves but to explore the relation between them and workplace practices; that is to look at their effects and, conversely, how workplace practice feeds into the production of knowledge in work psychology. For this reason, the historical texts and case studies I examine are selected for their relevance to practice. This book does not focus on the classic texts of industrial psychology such as Munsterberg (1913) or Viteles (1933). It stays close to the workplace and to the practices in which psychological knowledge was involved. Whether the agent was a psychologist, a business administration academic, an internal or external consultant or change agent, is of minor importance.

Managers are the largest group who use work psychology: all the areas I have listed have been incorporated at some time or other into management training. Other practitioners who would probably have training in some of these areas are consultants, trainers and researchers who are employed by organizations to do the following:

help select employees;
devise appraisal systems;
design systems and methods of work organization;
instigate change in the organization;

advise on the introduction of new technology;
advise on 'manpower' planning and succession plans;
enhance safety;
enhance productivity;
cope with stress and conflict;
help to problem-solve;
improve decision-making and teamwork;
find out what employees think about their jobs and about the company;
negotiate pay and conditions;
counsel people when they lose their jobs;
advise people on what jobs suit them and how to create a favourable impression on application;
train managers to manage people and supervisors to supervise them in ways that will promote a climate favourable to the work of the organization.

The list is impressive in its diversity, but the items have in common that they try to understand how people work, for the purpose of improving this. The present-day *Journal of Occupational Psychology* (subtitled 'an International Journal of Industrial and Organizational Psychology') demonstrates that its chosen scope covers more or less the same ground:

> The journal's domain is broad, covering industrial, organizational, engineering, vocational and personnel psychology, as well as behavioural aspects of industrial relations, ergonomics, human factors and industrial sociology. Interdisciplinary approaches are welcome. (Guide notes for referees)

It is cumbersome, when referring in general to these areas, to specify all the subtitles but it is often misleading to use one only, since the labels mean different things in different epochs and countries. Before the Second World War 'industrial psychology' was the commonest label, and when I am referring to that period it is usually the appropriate title. However it had different emphases in the United States and Britain. In the US it came to refer almost exclusively to psychometric testing, whereas in Britain it included fatigue research, working conditions and job design as well (all of which together were also referred to as 'human factors'). In Britain in the 1950s, Professor Alec Rodger encapsulated the definition of the field in the slogan 'Fitting the man to the job and the job to the man' (FMJ/FJM):

Fitting the man to the job
through occupational *guidance*
personnel *selection*
training and development

fitting the job to the man
through *methods* design
equipment design
design and negotiation of *working conditions*
and
(physical and social) *rewards.*
(From an undated student handout issued by Alec Rodger in the 1970s)

By the 1950s the title in Britain had changed to 'occupational psychology' to reflect a move away from purely industrial work settings. In the United States this term has been used only to refer to knowledge in the field of vocational guidance (vocational psychology in the US). A focus on the individual at work has been characteristic of the history of these areas, from scientific management to human relations, and this theoretical focus has had distinct effects practice. Rodger's definition is now deemed by many to be too narrow because it does not address the question of organizations within which the 'man' works. (It has also helped to render women workers invisible, but has not been rejected for that reason.) Since the 1960s, the term organizational behaviour had become increasingly popular.

When I need a label for the general domain which is not historically or geographically specific, I use the term 'work psychology'. Its main disadvantage is that it suggests that the areas I shall be talking about fall within psychology, which is not true: sociologists and management theorists would claim parts of 'work psychology' too. None the less the term is faithful to my purpose because it signals the focus on individuals at work which, as I shall argue, dominates knowledge and practice in the field.

The American and British histories of work psychology are closely interrelated, but their differences provide a further way of understanding how specific conditions have produced different emphases in psychological knowledge (for example the greater power of trade unions in Britain in the 1920s affected the treatment of scientific management and the orientation of British industrial psychology). The topics and cases on which I focus are about equally divided between Britain and the United States.

3. The Status of Knowledge

This book is about the relation between knowledge and practice in work psychology and its history provides evidence of the nature of this relationship. My interest is not simply academic. I believe that work psychology is blind to the conditions of its own production and their consequent effects and that this has far-reaching and unfortunate consequences for its quality and integrity.

There is virtually no debate about the status of the knowledge which makes up work psychology and this state of affairs is the result of the uncritical identification of work psychology with behavioural science, which in turn identifies with natural science. There is lively debate about the status of scientific knowledge in, for example, physics and also within the social sciences, but the issues have largely passed psychology and work psychology by. Science provides a justification for believing that there is no problem with the status of knowledge. It prescribes that the knowledge gained through scientific methods is unproblematically true and that scientists are potentially neutral agents in the process. It assumes that, if applied correctly, such knowledge would necessarily be progressive and that, if there were a problem of application, science and scientists would not be responsible. This position has characterized industrial psychology from its beginnings. For example, Munsterberg, whose book *Psychology and Industrial Efficiency* (1913) is considered the seminal text of industrial psychology, features in his introduction a discussion of the relation between any technical science (into which category he puts applied psychology) and the product. The question of responsibility is central:

> We must understand that every technical science says only: you must make use of this means, if you wish to reach this or that particular end. But no technical science can decide within its limits whether the end itself is really a desirable one . . . We must make the same discrimination in the psychotechnical field. The psychologist may point out the methods by which an involuntary confession can be secured from a defendant, but whether it is justifiable to extort involuntary confession is a problem which does not concern the psychologist . . . Economic psychotechnics may serve certain ends of commerce and industry but whether these are the best ones is not a care with which the psychologist has to be burdened. (Munsterberg 1913: 17, 18, 19)

If scientific knowledge is believed to be neutral and true, this argument is persuasive. If not, the argument collapses. It is one of my major purposes in writing this book to demonstrate the ways in which knowledge concerned with people at work (what Munsterberg calls 'economic psychotechnics') is not objective or true in any simple sense. It is a historical product of interests and power relations in practice. Knowledge should not be separated from its effects. However this position is not, in the first instance, an ethical one. I start from the premiss that there is no such thing as knowledge in isolation from its conditions of production and reproduction. Knowledge cannot be separated from its effects. Moreover the relation between knowledge and practice is not a one-way cause–effect relationship. Managerial practices, themselves affected by work psychology, reciprocally affect

the concepts and theories emerging from work psychology. This is what I mean by the inseparability of knowledge and practice and the way that they reciprocally produce and reproduce each other.[2]

4. Power, Knowledge, Practice

In this section I shall try to illustrate the usefulness of these concepts in breaking through the barriers that science has erected against understanding how work psychology is produced. As a brief example of the relations between power, knowledge and practice, I shall take the case of the concepts of motivation and job satisfaction in organizational behaviour (see especially chapters 5 and 7). Because of the long-standing dominance of science in the West, the term knowledge itself has come to have connotations of fact and certitude. In contrast I see knowledge and practice as produced within the same historical conditions. In this case they were conditions which faced employers and managers with a serious problem of ensuring that the labour force turned out products of competitive price and quality.

Motivation and job satisfaction are not phenomena that exist in some universal and timeless state, that awaited human relations science to discover and apply them. Both the concepts and the practices that confer on them some kind of material reality are a product of changes in the organization of work, which were themselves the result of the dominance of some interests over others; of owners (both private capitalists and the state) over labourers. Job satisfaction would have been an unthinkable concept in a feudal regime, where tied workers had few means of opposing the power of the landowners and monarch. Neither was it produced in the context of pre-industrial, self-employed craft workers whose control over work was a condition of their existence.

The problem of motivating an individual worker emerged in order to create sufficient satisfaction with the job to produce adequate work. Since the concentration of workers in large factories, with mechanization and with the emergence of a management hierarchy to determine and control work performance (see chapter 2 for details), jobs had been fragmented, routinized and control often entirely removed from the person who actually performed the work. Supervision of this alienating work (the same conditions produced the sociological concept of 'alienation') became correspondingly tight and harsh, but despite attempts at perfecting systems of control, notably those advocated by scientific management, workers did not conform to management demands on them. Enough resisted, individually, in informal groups, or through labour organizations, to present a problem. Given the existence of these forms of resistance, the failure of

employers and management to exercise unadulterated power and the need to devise forms of control of work performance produced human relations management. Its specific practices depended on the idea that individual workers could be motivated – could be made to find sufficient satisfaction at work – to perform in ways that management wanted.

In principle, there could be an almost infinite number of ways of conceptualizing the problem of getting workers' commitment to production, and hence an array of possible approaches to its solution. The concepts of motivation and job satisfaction did not emerge simply from managerial problems; although their production in human relations form in organizational behaviour was specific to those problems, they also had preconditions in lay, psychological and industrial psychological knowledge. In general psychology, motivation was conceptualized in predominantly physiological terms and its transition to application in the context of job motivation owed more to psychoanalytic and lay use of the term motivation.

Knowledge is a word which is usually used in the singular and this reflects the aspirations to coherence and unity of scientific knowledge. Where theories are multiple, concepts inconsistent and facts incoherent, it is said to be due to the immature state of a discipline, rather than to the character of knowledge itself. The assumption that knowledge is unitary makes it virtually impossible to untangle the complex conditions and the multifarious powers that produce knowledge (or rather, to underline the point, that produce knowledges). Work psychology is a hotchpotch of different theoretical assumptions and concepts which, unsurprisingly, make for some inconsistent and conflicting precepts underpinning practice. The attempt to increase job satisfaction is a case in point. I have said that the dominant knowledge underpinning the attempt was the human relations emphasis on modifying the individual. But when individual workers were insufficiently moved by supervisors' attempts to be nice to them (see chapters 5 and 6 for a detailed treatment of this point), there was another tradition within industrial psychology which approached questions of job performance from the point of view of job design; a tradition emanating from engineering through scientific management and ergonomics. Paradoxically, during the 1950s, this tradition became incorporated into the human relations approach to motivation and job satisfaction through job redesign (see chapter 6).

On the periphery there was a Marxist theoretical tradition, which drew some power through its close identification with working-class, and therefore trade union, interests. It was premised on the principle that a conflict between owners of the means of production and those who provided labour power was inevitable under capitalism. This

tradition had drawn attention to the deskilling of work in industrial capitalism (Braverman 1974). In this view, job satisfaction would depend on changes to the whole organization and control of work.

Here were different knowledges, with different political and financial implications. It was not scientific merit which determined the emergence of a human relations model of motivation and job satisfaction, but rather the play of powers amongst interested groups at the time. Amongst the employers and managers of Western industrial organizations, demechanization was out of the question. Moreover it would have been heretical to consider handing back control of the labour process to the labourers (later this position was modified). Particularly in the United States, employers did not like to deal directly with unions, especially on basic issues like the organization of work, which was considered a management prerogative. They feared that such dialogue would represent a concession to trade union power. Politically, the best target was the individual worker and epistemologically the preconditions for this focus were already well developed in the changes which were taking place in work psychology.

In Foucault's conception, power, like knowledge, is never singular or one-way, never homogeneous or monolithic. If machine-pacing, deskilling, piece rates and tight supervision had succeeded in achieving optimal productivity, motivation and job satisfaction would never have seen the light of day. As I have argued, they were a product of the play of different powers at a given time. But even this gives a picture of power which is too simply dichotomous. Amongst workers and amongst employers, the understanding of their interests, the forces imposing upon their actions and the powers and practices available to them, all varied enormously. In addition the state intervened in different ways; for example in Britain during the First World War it initiated the fatigue studies in munitions factories which launched British industrial psychology, at least temporarily, on a welfarist path. Finally psychologists, whether of the 'pure' or 'applied' variety, have their interests, which feed into the conditions within which particular knowledge emerges. In general, the belief in their own scientific status and neutrality gave them legitimacy and a simple answer to potentially troubling questions of responsibility. These dovetailed nicely with the interests of employers, who wanted their view of the problem resolved and not challenged. They also benefited from the reputation of work psychology as scientific, because it was therefore deemed to be above the politics of industrial conflict. Indeed it appeared to offer them something even better, because it claimed to solve such conflict of interest (see chapter 2).

In this book, consistent with Foucault's usage, I use power to mean a productive force, ever-present in relations of all kinds. It is in this sense