**The employability of Occupational Psychology Graduates: insights from my professional doctorate**

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There has been much debate over recent years as to the identity challenge facing Occupational Psychology graduates– what do they do with their degrees, what does it mean to be chartered, how can they shape a unique identity? In order to provide some evidence for this debate I embarked on a Professional Doctorate in Occupational Psychology at Northumbria University in 2012. This was driven in part by my own experiences of running an MSc Occupational Psychology programme at Northumbria University, my passion for my subject and the education of the next generation of Occupational Psychologists (OP), and by projects such as OP FIRST (2006). I am also grateful that my research led to my involvement in volunteering with the BPS as co-Chair of the Division of Occupational Psychology Training Committee, member of the Professional and Educational Qualifications Groups….and most recently as Academic Board Member of the Stage Two Qualification in Occupational Psychology.

My mixed methods research was grouped into four key areas:

* Identification of the barriers and facilitators to an OP career
* A survey of what OPs currently do
* Identification of the relationship between psychological capital, OP facilitators, competence employability, and both objective and subjective career success
* Understanding the career journeys of OP graduates through 1-2-1 narrative interviews

I was awarded my doctorate in March 2016 (and I realise that it has taken an age to share the findings with the group who potentially benefit most from it. In my defence, shortly following my viva, I had a period of maternity leave and I have only recently returned to ‘normality’, hence the delay!). You may recall that I wrote a short piece in 2013 when I originally embarked on my studies so I am grateful for the opportunity to share the key findings at the other end of the process.

**Background to my research**

I positioned this work in an employability context, utilising the latest findings in relation to how individuals make sense of their careers and employment opportunities. I took the stance that employability was multi-faceted (Fugate, Kinicki & Ashforth, 2004; Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden, 2005, 2006; Tymon, 2013), underpinned by theories such as Career Construction Theory (Savickas, 1997) and Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1964), and my findings certainly support the interactionist nature (Veld, Semeijn and Van Vuuren, 2015) of employability theory i.e. that there are multiple facets and theories which interrelate. However, rather than focus on the theory, I believe the most interesting aspect for this publication is the practical findings – the things that might be helpful in supporting OP graduates going forward in their careers (if you are interested in the theory and the broader findings of my doctorate here is a link <http://nrl.northumbria.ac.uk/27296/1/elsey.victoria_prof%20doc.pdf>).

The data I gathered was from a cross section of Occupational Psychology graduates who had all completed a BPS accredited MSc Occupational Psychology programme. This meant that there were a variety of individuals including trainee and HCPC registered Occupational Psychologists as well as individuals who had not pursued these routes.

**Practical Findings and Suggestions**

As you can imagine there were many interesting findings from my research and I have chosen to focus here on the ones that I think we can all affect, but by no means is this an exhaustive list.

1. **It is important to ‘job’ or ‘career craft’**

It is rare that any OP graduate walks straight into the job that they want to do for the rest of their lives, instead each role adds valuable skills and experiences, which can support employability. This is best defined in employability models as adaptability (Fugate et al., 2004; Savickas, 1997, 2002, 2005) and flexibility (van der Heijde & van der Heijden, 2006). It is clear from my research that not all OP graduates perceived an abundance of available job opportunities – often due to external environmental issues (geographic location for example). For individuals to feel that they had been able to fulfil their career ambitions, many were working in roles, which were not necessarily perceived as OP. However, being an OP was about mind-set, about developing a role to suit the learning and experiences that OP graduates have and to enable them to add value. This means that we have to prepare for working in this world…the world where you don’t just apply for the job you want, but you make the job what you want it to be.

Anecdotes would explain this as a ‘foot in the door’ and in relation to this there is a wealth of literature emerging on the concept of ‘job crafting’ (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). For those of you who are not familiar with this literature, job crafting refers to the reinvention of roles by an individual which can lead to greater levels of satisfaction and engagement (Berg, Dutton & Wrzesniewski, 2008). Those individuals who had learned to craft certainly appeared to be able to fulfil their Occupational Psychologist identity. In relation to employability, the concepts of adaptability and flexibility were important, particularly for those individuals who crafted. Participants also expressed the importance of reflecting – on past experiences, current position and future opportunities. This was seen as valuable in supporting career identity, particularly when many factors could affect career (availability of jobs, parental leave, pursuing chartered and registered status, continuing professional development etc.). So perhaps we need to think in a different way – not about which job we will apply for, but which organisation is attractive to us and how we can shape roles to enable us to add value. Which leads nicely to my next point!

1. **We all need to raise our profile**

This relates to point one, but goes far deeper than jobs. This is about our collective identity. How do we demonstrate our value when we use such varied job titles, for example? How does what we do differ from or add to what aligned professionals do (HR for example) and does it matter? What is our elevator pitch e.g. “I am an Occupational Psychologist and that means ...”. Instead, we often use titles which we feel are more readily accepted (yet not protected by the HCPC) – work psychologist, business psychologist, organisational psychologist etc. which are easily confused with other professions (I don’t know how many times I have been called an occupational therapist!). I am the first one to admit that the term ‘Occupational Psychologist’ is not well understood, but if this is our title then do we not all have a responsibility to protect it, to use it and to educate clients and employers about what an OP is and what OP training means? In my research, participants commented that they felt that could only do their role in the way that they did because they were OP graduates – having a psychology degree, an MSc and pursuing chartered status…yet we also know that a small percentage of graduates actually go on to pursue chartered status. So does chartered status matter for employability or for identity? Who does pursue chartered and registered status and why/why not? We can all make assumptions about this, but do we actually know what difference chartered and registered status makes to individuals? In my research it seemed to be about ‘feeling professional’, working to the top of the profession and being able to demonstrate that one operates to a code of conduct (but of course individuals without chartered and registered status also do this). In summary, I would suggest that this is our profession, we own it and if we want things to be different, we have to make it so! It is not the responsibility of the BPS or the DOP, it is our collective responsibility…so what is your elevator pitch?

1. **We need to understand what OPs do**

This may be one of the most difficult of all of the suggestions. The DOP try to gather data, I tried to gather data too but without participation from OP graduates, we really cannot build up a picture of what OPs do. In my research, I managed to survey approximately 200 OP graduates, and there were over 100 different job titles expressed! There is a general perception that *“nearly all occupational psychology practitioners work for themselves or in small consultancies”* (Briner, 2010, p. 892) but actually we do not know this for sure. My research suggested that many work in consultancy settings but equally there are individuals employed in the public sector and private sector organisations in a variety of roles (I presume they are often job crafting!). One easy thing we can do relates to point two – be proud of who we are and the value that we can add – this may be a collective (and the DOP have certainly tried to help here) or individually, what does your training give you that will help you to add value? I believe that we can be reticent in doing this, almost as if we have to apologise for being OPs! My sense from the data was that there was incredible diversity in roles that OP training can lead to…and that graduates were shaping roles (see point one) in a variety of different ways. This I believe is our biggest strength and our greatest weakness – we can do anything…but we can also do anything, which makes getting that ‘foot in the door’ challenging! I am not entirely sure what the answer is here, but please, participate in career destination surveys, support the next generation of OPs (give talks at your local university about your career journey), if many OPs work alone, think about how we can support one another. My research suggested that having a critical mass of OPs was really helpful for identity formation and where individuals felt alone this could be isolating. This leads to my final point, how can we be more inclusive as a profession and what steps can each of us take to support a fellow OP graduate?

**Concluding thoughts**

Conducting this research was challenging, there are so many options and routes – the only thing that was consistent was that every applicant had completed a BPS accredited MSc in Occupational Psychology (or similar title). It was difficult to understand the landscape and the role that these diverse participants had in it. It did however feel incredibly positive, and I think we (as a profession) need some supportive messages! There are some really interesting jobs out there and many ways in which our training can support us to do these roles, we need to be creative and flexible and many of us probably do these things already, after all, who is better placed to understand careers than we are!?

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