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Work and Organizational Psychology

Jo Silvester

INTRODUCTION

Work and organizational psychology has a rich tradition in qualitative research, yet anyone coming new to the field could easily be forgiven for thinking otherwise. Most academic journals and conference papers are dominated by empirical investigations that fit a 'scientific' epistemology. In fact, organizational psychologists have been criticized for lagging far behind other social science disciplines in utilizing qualitative methods (Spector, 2001). This chapter explores where and why qualitative research is (or is not) used in organizational psychology. It is not intended as an exhaustive description of the literature (for an excellent recent review see Cassell and Symon (2006), and for more detailed descriptions of many of the methods described here see Cassell and Symon (2004)). The chapter is, however, an attempt to explain the apparent 'tension' between quantitative and qualitative research in the workplace. My specific aims are to: briefly review the contribution made by qualitative research within organizational psychology; explore where qualitative methods are used in current research and practice; discuss reasons for the apparent dominance of quantitative methods, and finally; consider what the future might hold for qualitative research within the discipline.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Organizational psychology is concerned with the way people think, feel and behave in work and organizational contexts. Organizational psychologists (who are also known as occupational, work, or industrial/organizational (IO) psychologists) are 'concerned about the ethical use of psychological theories and techniques and their impact on the well-being and effectiveness of individuals, groups and organizations' (Arnold et al., 2005: xvii). Important knowledge areas within this domain include motivation and employee relations, personnel selection and assessment, training, well-being at work, organizational

development and change, appraisal, career development, work design, and work safety. As such the topics studied by organizational psychologists are many and varied. They range from investigations of how individual characteristics impact on work performance, to interventions reducing stress at work, and evaluation of training interventions designed to improve safety in the workplace. However, organizational psychology, like other applied psychology fields such as health or clinical psychology, involves the application of many different theories including those that might be described as 'cognitive', 'social' or 'developmental'. For example, an important field in organizational psychology has involved applying cognitive theory to workplace phenomena (see Hodgkinson, 2003). Consequently, the methods adopted by researchers and practitioners reflect a rich and diverse field.

Organizational psychology as a discipline emerged in the UK and USA largely as a consequence of efforts to improve assessment of personnel in the First World War and Second World War. Initially the US army developed methods of psychological testing to assist in selecting and training individuals for the armed forces during the First World War. This led to the appearance of several commercial consultancies (e.g. Psychological Corporation) which specialized in the creation of psychological techniques to assess individuals for occupational roles. At the same time a slightly different approach materialized in the UK, where psychologists became increasingly interested in how work and the workplace could be designed more efficiently. An example of this was a series of studies investigating the personal health and efficiency of workers in munitions factories (for a more detailed discussion of these see Chmiel, 2000). In 1921 this work led to the creation of the UK National Institute of Industrial Psychology (NIIP), set up with the specific aim of promoting and encouraging practical application of the *sciences* of psychology and physiology to commerce and industry. By the 1930s the NIIP was a centre of excellence for research into topics such as work hours, rest pauses, dexterity and work conditions: the underlying rationale being that the scientific approach could improve worker performance and, ultimately, national economic success (Kwiatkowski, Duncan and Shimmin, 2006).

The advent of the Second World War prompted further interest in how psychological methods, such as job analysis, psychological testing, interviewing and vocational guidance, could help fit people to jobs. With such large numbers of people being recruited to military roles, there was a need to ensure that individuals' strengths could be identified and utilized most efficiently. The person-job fit model of work performance emerged as an important framework that still underpins much personnel selection research and practice to the present day. The basic premises of this model are that individuals differ in the knowledge skills and abilities (KSAs) they bring to the workplace, jobs require different KSAs, therefore a closer match between people and jobs should result in higher levels of performance. Consequently, the quantification of individual differences, job requirements and work performance became central to the work of organizational psychologists. However, the Second World War also prompted interest in the human side of technology and the dynamics of leadership and groups in military and industrial contexts. This led to work on group and organizational behaviour, culture, and learning in the US (e.g. Lewin, 1947). In the UK the Tavistock Institute, established in 1947, became an influential focus for researchers and practitioners interested in psychodynamic perspectives on organizational change, action research methods, socio-technical systems theory, and group dynamics (Guest, 2006). Arguably this point marks the start of a divergence between quantitative and qualitative researchers that remains today. Despite a preponderance of quantitative research in organizational psychology, however, in this chapter I will argue that qualitative approaches still play an important, but often understated role in shaping research and practice in the field.

QUALITATIVE METHODS IN ORGANIZATIONAL RESEARCH

Qualitative research involves watching people and interacting with people as we find them within their own territory, speaking their own language, on their own terms (Kirk and Miller, 1986; Fryer, 1991). Like qualitative researchers in other fields, those in organizational psychology are concerned with attempts to describe, decode and interpret the meanings of work-related phenomena for employees and employers. For the most part, they focus on *describing* the nature of something, which in organizational psychology has often been a precursor to quantification or *measuring* the degree to which a particular feature (e.g. stress) is present. A key difference between qualitative and quantitative researchers in organizational psychology is that the former typically view reality as socially constructed and accept the existence of multiple and equally legitimate interpretations of work-related events. In contrast, quantitative researchers have generally adopted a scientific approach, and sought to identify general principles about work related phenomena that can be tested on the basis of empirical evidence. These differences are apparent in the methods these researchers utilize. For example, according to a constructionist approach, individuals shape meaning of work events in their effort to make sense of and understand their role and the workplace. Thus, work satisfaction will mean different things to different people, including: monetary reward, flexibility and control over the timing of work, intellectual stimulation, or social contact. Researchers interested in these unique perspectives are more likely to use qualitative methods such as interviews or diaries that enable them to probe topics more important to the participant than the researcher. However, scientific researchers are more likely to use questionnaires that allow them to draw inferences and make comparisons across populations of workers or organizations and quantify differences. In organizational psychology the ability to measure difference has provided an important and powerful source of information for individuals in organizations making decisions about employees or the allocation of resources. This has in large part contributed to the popularity of the scientific approach in this discipline.

Yet, despite the low profile of qualitative approaches in academic and published research, they are used extensively by practitioners (and in many cases researchers) to support the development and implementation of many different interventions, such as organizational change programmes, training needs analyses, strategic review, and the design of development plans. Perhaps more surprising, however, is the extent to which qualitative methods feature in personnel selection research and practice; historically an important area for organizational psychologists, and one that has generated an extensive volume of research and practice in a scientific tradition (Salgado, 1999). For example, selection and assessment methods are generally evaluated in terms of their reliability and validity, or more specifically, how effectively they compare applicants and predict future job performance. A multimillion pound psychometric testing industry now exists based on the premise that it is possible to identify psychological constructs that predict employee performance, and measure the extent to which different people possess them. There is considerable support for relationships between work performance and psychological constructs such as general mental ability (Schmidt and Hunter, 1998) and personality traits (e.g. conscientiousness; Robertson, Baron, Gibbons, MacIver and Nyfield, 2000). Similarly, meta-analytic research has shown that other factors contribute to aspects of work experience including job satisfaction, leadership, stress and motivation (e.g. Ones, Visvesvaran and Schmidt, 1993).

This research provides an important evidence base for the scientific practice of employee selection and has no doubt increased the popularity of the discipline as one capable of promoting enhanced worker and organizational performance. It is perhaps

not so surprising, therefore, that qualitative research, with its focus on describing rather than predicting, has been received with less enthusiasm. Yet qualitative approaches are often central to personnel selection and the next section explores some of the qualitative methods that have been used to understand and map occupational roles.

Qualitative methods in personnel selection

According to best practice guidelines, certain steps should be followed in order to develop a valid and robust employee selection system. First, the job being selected for should be systematically defined by describing the roles, responsibilities and tasks that a job incumbent will be required to perform, as well as the standard he or she will need to perform to. This process, known as job analysis, should also determine the KSAs that an employee in that role will need in order to perform it effectively as well as the behavioural indicators of good and poor performance. The second step involves developing a selection process using valid, fair and reliable methods to compare applicants on the basis of these KSAs. Finally, the third step is to validate the selection process (i.e. demonstrate that it works) by comparing performance of successful applicants during the selection process with their subsequent performance in the job. Most selection and assessment therefore involves measurement and statistical comparison of applicant performance during selection and once in the job.

Analysis of work roles is not exclusive to personnel selection, but it is central. Job analysis is essentially a systematic process that incorporates a range of methods to describe what role incumbents must do (task analysis), and what they need in order to do it well (person analysis). The output of a job analysis can be used for various purposes including job evaluation and classification, job design and redesign, performance appraisal, training, succession planning and selection. Indeed, Brannick and Levine (2002: 7) go so far as to say that job analysis 'forms the basis for the solution of virtually every human resource problem'.

The range of job analysis methods illustrates how the process has been treated as both a scientific and a constructivist process by researchers and practitioners. For example, the Job Components Inventory (JCI; Banks, Jackson, Stafford and Warr, 1982) and the Position Analysis Questionnaire (PAQ; McCormick, Jeanneret and Mecham, 1972) are highly structured and mechanistic approaches to analysing work roles based on the assumption that it is possible to classify aspects of a role according to common work tasks and characteristics. More recent attempts to define a universal set of role competencies also typify the scientific search for underlying factors of job performance (e.g. O*NET: http://online.onetcenter.org). Although this work can help us to understand commonalities between roles and occupations, it is less effective in exploring and describing the unique nature of individual work roles in particular organizational contexts. Indeed, one of the most important, but least discussed, roles of job analysis is to communicate what an organization expects from a role incumbent in terms of performance targets and how these should be achieved. Thus a central function of job analysis is to facilitate a shared understanding of good and poor performance. In this instance, job analysis is less a 'scientific' process of uncovering an underlying objective reality, and more an active process of sense-making helping to construct a shared understanding of what a role means to managers and employees. Where the purpose of job analysis is to shape *and* map occupational roles (e.g. in the case of evolving or newly emergent roles), iterative and interactive qualitative methods such as critical incident interviewing, diaries, focus groups, and participant observation, are often more useful. The following methods are discussed to illustrate how different qualitative approached have been used by researchers and practitioners to explore and understand work roles.

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Critical incident technique

Flanagan (1954) first described the Critical Incident Technique (CIT) as a method for studying social science phenomena within a positivist research paradigm. CIT has since been developed as an investigative tool in organizational and job analysis (e.g. Silvester, Patterson and Ferguson, 2003). Flanagan describes CIT as a set of procedures for collecting direct observations of human behaviour. He defines an 'incident' as any specifiable human activity sufficiently complete in itself to permit inferences and predictions about a particular activity. In the case of job analysis, CIT has been used to gather information about important role-related behaviour from role incumbents and managers.

CIT was, in fact, the forerunner of 'behavioural event interviewing' developed by David McClelland and colleagues to identify behavioural competencies required by job incumbents. Interviewees are asked to describe the critical incidents they have encountered in their jobs in great detail and transcripts of these interviews are then analysed to extract the specific behaviours associated with different levels of performance. For example, an interviewee might be asked to describe an occasion where they observed a work colleague demonstrating excellent work performance, and another where they observed poor work performance. By probing the interviewee about what happened, and reassuring them that examples can be anonymous, it is possible to obtain a full description. This enables researchers to gather behavioural examples that can then be used to define positive and negative performance indicators for different performance standards.

Repertory grid

Like several other methods described here, repertory grids have often been analysed using quantitative techniques, illustrating Cassell and Symon's (2004) point that it is not methods themselves that best determine whether research should be described as qualitative or quantitative, but how the methods are used, the data interpreted, and what conclusions (if any) are reached. The repertory grid technique originates from George Kelly's (1955) personal construct psychology, where individuals are viewed as actively making sense of their world. Kelly suggests that we create constructs in order to describe ourselves and the events we witness, and that these constructs will change and develop as we experience and learn from different events. In the workplace, employees develop constructs about their roles which can be explored using the repertory grid technique. Interestingly, the idea that constructs develop with experience is particularly useful when considering differences between how novices and experts experience their roles. Although the role itself may not differ, a qualitative approach implicitly recognizes and accepts that an experienced individual will conceptualizes their role in different and potentially important ways to new employees.

In brief, the practice of repertory grid technique involves three steps: (1) elicitation of elements identifying elements relevant to the topic to be studied (in the case of job analysis these might be an excellent performer, a poor performer and a novice), (2) elicitation of constructs differentiating these elements (e.g. possesses knowledge of wider organization), and (3) construction of a matrix listing elements and constructs (Fransella, Bell and Bannister, 2004). Although repertory grid was initially developed to explore individuals' unique constructs, researchers have sought to combine findings from interviews with different individuals to identify commonalities. One area where repertory grid has proven particularly useful is in exploring assumed differences about how individuals from different groups perform the same role. For example, Dick and Jankowicz (2001) used the method to explore how organizational culture impacts upon differential career progression for male and female police officers. Other work by Beverly Alimo-Metcalfe has used repertory grid methodology to

explore constructs of leadership held by male and female managers in the public sector (Alimo-Metcalfe and Alban-Metcalfe, 1999). They identified 48 'leadership dimensions' that were then used to develop a Transformational Leadership Questionnaire. Thus a qualitative approach formed the basis for development of a quantitative tool.

Diary studies

Researchers have asked employees to keep diaries in order to investigate a variety of organizational topics including call centre work (Holman, 2005), violations of the psychological contract (Conway and Briner, 2002), mood changes in shift work (Williamson, Gower and Clark, 1994) and well-being at work (Sonnentag, 2001). They are also a popular method for capturing information about work roles. Diaries involve role incumbents keeping a personalized record of their work-related activities, with whom they interact, and in some cases, their feelings and emotions about different activities. In job analysis, diaries are particularly useful for understanding how much time is spent on different activities, as well as the relative frequency of various tasks and responsibilities. Diary research varies from purely quantitative collection of questionnaire data at different time points, to purely qualitative descriptions provided by employees about their own feelings and thoughts for work events they, rather than the researcher, might consider important.

The diary method is particularly useful in helping to identify those aspects of a job that are less easy to observe or may occur relatively infrequently, but are particularly important for understanding the role. For example, In the UK and many Western societies, most work involves cognitive rather than manual skills. There is also a greater focus on the emotional labour undertaken by service workers (Holman, 2005). Diaries allow researchers to capture role incumbents' perceptions and thoughts about their work and the cognitive skills required. This can provide important additional information for shaping selection systems that provide a realistic insight into the job for applicants.

Participant observation

The fact that participant observation is used less frequently in job analysis is more a reflection of the time and cost involved in using the method, than its utility. Indeed, some argue that there are few more effective methods at allowing researchers to study at first hand the day-to-day experience of people at work (Waddington, 2004). Participant observation, as the term implies, involves the researcher engaging (or participating) in the work that he or she is observing, but the degree to which 'observers' participate can vary. Four categories involving different levels of participation are described by Burgess (1984): (1) 'complete participant', involving covert involvement, concealing the researcher's identity and purpose; (2) 'participant as observer', where no attempt is made to conceal the observation or its the purpose and where the observer can participate in activities and form relationships with those observed; (3) 'observer as participant', involving more superficial contact with observed individuals such as occasional questions or interviews; and (4) 'complete observer', where the researcher has no interaction. The latter approach may be favoured where there is a belief that the researcher's involvement may pollute or distort the 'reality' of the workplace. However, the very presence of a researcher has been found to influence how people behave, as shown in the now famous Hawthorne studies (e.g. Arnold et al., 2005: 18) (where knowledge that they were to be studied was found to be the primary determinant of increases in group performance).

An excellent example of participant observation is provided by Anat Rafaeli in her study of cashiers in local supermarkets in Israel (Rafaeli, 1989). Rafaeli applied, trained and then worked as a cashier for 18 hours per week for three months. Her own observations together with semi-structured critical incident interviews with 30 cashiers

and 30 male and female customers provided a detailed insight into the cashier–customer relationship. Rafaeli pursued an iterative process of systematically going back and forth between theoretical insights and data, describing the struggle for control between customers and cashiers over service interactions and identifying that manager influence was legitimate but remote.

Waddington (2004) points out that there can be disadvantages with participant observation. For example, consultants who work closely with organizations for long periods of time often speak of the risks of 'going native', that is, developing stronger relationships and allegiances with their host organization than their own employers. These relationships, which can influence the inferences drawn by researchers, draw particular criticism from scientific researchers for their potential threat to validity. However, as Waddington (2004: 163–4) reflects on his own study of strike behaviour at Ansells: 'Whilst participant observation is less tidy and more complicated than I formerly pretended, it is one of the surest ways I know of getting *directly to the heart* of human experience'.

Grounded theory

Although grounded theory is a well known qualitative research method, it is surprising that it has been so rarely used in job analysis. Grounded theory is more common in studies of organizational change where it is well suited to a dialectic exploration of relationships between agents and internal groups (Nicholson, 1990). An example of such work is an investigation of the development of innovation in the Spanish ceramic industry by Carrero, Peiró and Salanova (2000) where 14 in-depth interviews were conducted over a three-year period in four organizations where new innovation practices had been introduced. The choice of grounded theory was based on a desire to use an open and flexible research design that would allow reflection on the frequent changes and movements that characterized the organizational context. Their aim was to build theories of organizational innovation grounded in data.

Grounded theory methodology is a style of data analysis that aims to discover concepts and hypotheses relevant to a particular area of organizational research (Länsisalmi, Peiró and Kivimäki, 2004). Originally developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) grounded theory provides new insights into social processes without forcing the data into previous theoretical frameworks. In the case of job analysis, this means that grounded theory is a virtual antithesis to the application of pre-specified competency frameworks or job categories. A recent example of the use of grounded theory to job analysis is provided by Koczwara (2006) in her study of leadership and diversity in investment banking. She conducted 40 semi-structured interviews with managers in the UK and USA to capture what they described as behaviours evidencing whether an employee has leadership potential (i.e. the potential to move to higher levels within the organization). Koczwara combined grounded theory with a card sort method using the following steps: (1) extracting and recording all behavioural descriptions of leadership potential provided by managers on individual cards, (2) asking individuals to undertake a card sort to group behaviours into initial themes, (3) re-examination of behaviour groupings to break them into more precise groups called Elements. (Level 1 coding), and (4) re-grouping of Elements into behavioural competencies (Level 2 coding). A subsequent quantitative comparison of these competencies revealed differences between the behaviours associated with leadership potential for men and women that may help to explain the glass ceiling effect (Koczwara and Silvester, 2006).

MAPPING ROLE COMPETENCIES: TWO CASE STUDIES

What these methods clearly illustrate is the spectrum of qualitative to quantitative approaches that have been used to map and

understand occupational roles. At one end, scientific researchers using a reductionist approach have sought to identify universal job components and create tools capable of describing any work role. An example of this is 'off-the-shelf' competency frameworks that include a range of different job characteristics (e.g. 'works closely with customers', 'involved in selling products'), from which job incumbents and managers are asked to choose those which best describe their role. 'Off-the-shelf' competency frameworks are useful in situations where time is short and detailed understanding of a particular role less important. But they are more limited in their ability to provide insight into the unique characteristics of roles in different organizational contexts. In contrast, qualitative approaches, much like emic studies in cross-cultural research, focus on the people for whom that role has meaning. Using a 'bottom-up' approach involving interviews with multiple stakeholders, researchers and practitioners consider how the role is made sense of by different people and search for those aspects that make the role unique. This chapter provides two examples of how competency frameworks have been developed in changing work sectors (medical and political) (see below). In both cases, the approach taken begins with a stakeholder analysis, and interviews and observations, but both end with the use of quantitative methods to explore their validity in selection.

Competency modelling

According to Sparrow (1995), competencies have been one of the 'big ideas' in human resource management (HRM), but debate still rages as to what they constitute. Some organizational psychologists treat competencies as generic, seeking to identify those that can be found in different roles and organizations (as witnessed by the previous description of off-the-shelf competency frameworks). Others focus on 'behavioural competencies' as soft skills, which are seen as being associated with underlying individual characteristics, such as skills, personality and motivation (Boyatzis, 1982). In this case competencies are evidenced by patterns of behaviour (referred to as behavioural indicators), which are used as criteria in employee selection, assessment and development. It is agued that, by being explicit about important role-related behaviours, an organization can facilitate a shared understanding of what is meant by good and poor performance more easily.

Competency modelling is a comparatively recent form of job analysis. It seeks to create a common language about a role and language is therefore of fundamental importance in describing work events and behaviour (Schippmann et al., 2000). However, the extent to which competency modelling can be viewed as a quantitative or a qualitative method depends crucially on the approach taken by the researcher or practitioner in identifying and describing the behavioural indicators and competencies. For example, in a constructionist approach, interviews with a wide range of stakeholders are used to elicit multiple perspectives, but these are then shaped to create an accepted and shared view using the language of that organization.

Medical competencies

An example of this approach is recent work by Fiona Patterson and her colleagues involving the creation of competency frameworks for a range of medical roles in the UK (e.g. general practitioner (GP), surgeon, obstetrician and gynaecologist, paediatrician, and anaesthetist). This is an ongoing project to evaluate medical roles, identify future development needs and design selection procedures for doctors applying for postgraduate specialty medical training. It forms part of the UK Government's Modernizing Medical Careers programme (General Medical Council, 2003). This is the largest change programme to be introduced in the health sector since the inception of the National Health Service (NHS) and is being managed by the Department of Health in conjunction with the Royal Colleges of Medicine and Deaneries responsible for medical training.

The original work was conducted to investigate the GP role. Patterson and her colleagues observed and analysed 168 separate doctor-patient interactions. They also interviewed patients, senior medical professionals, medical trainees, trainers and GPs themselves. Central to their approach was their assumption that the role is multi-faceted and that each group would provide information relating to different aspects and, more importantly, what they believed constituted good and poor performance. Therefore, including patients' perspectives of what they considered good practice by doctors was seen to be just as important (and in many cases more so) than other groups (Patterson et al., 2000). This work led to the development of a competency framework with eleven core competencies (including, empathy and sensitivity, communication skills, clinical knowledge and expertise, professional integrity) each of which was described using positive and negative behavioural indicators (see Box 27.1). This competency framework has since become the basis for a selection process for doctors applying for GP training with the NHS (Patterson, Lane, Ferguson and Norfolk, 2002). The process of information gathering based on the importance of multiple perspectives fits well with a qualitative research epistemology in that it recognizes the legitimacy and importance of the perspectives of different groups in shaping what is meant by good performance for doctors.

Since the original work there has been a move to integrate and streamline selection processes for all doctors applying for postgraduate training across all UK medical specialties. Patterson and her colleagues have been working to develop competency frameworks for all medical roles. Given the highly political nature of the project and its role as a major change agent in medical training, all subsequent projects have begun with a process of stakeholder analysis to map the individuals, groups and entities that may have a role in determining or defining the nature of a phenomenon. Stakeholder analysis has been associated most frequently with organizational change research (Burgoyne, 1998), so it is not surprising that it has relevance for strategic role analysis at an organizational or sector level. An example of the output of a stakeholder analysis conducted by Patterson, Silvester and Farrell (2006) as part of a project to define the role of 'surgeon' for the Royal College of Surgeons is provided in Figure 27.1. This stakeholder map resulted from a process of consultation with key visionaries in the surgical field, all of whom were asked to identify those groups with a legitimate interest in and relevant knowledge of the surgical role. Interviews

BOX 27.1 Example Behavioural Indicators (Positive) for the General Practitioner Role

(from Patterson et al., 2000)

Competency: 'Empathy and Sensitivity'

- Generates an atmosphere where the patient feels safe
- Patient is taken seriously, treated confidentially
- Picks up on patient's emotions and feelings
- Encourages patient, gives reassurances
- Use of 'I understand what you're saying'
- Focuses on the positive
- Treats individuals as people
- Checks patient needs are satisfied
- Demonstrates a caring attitude.

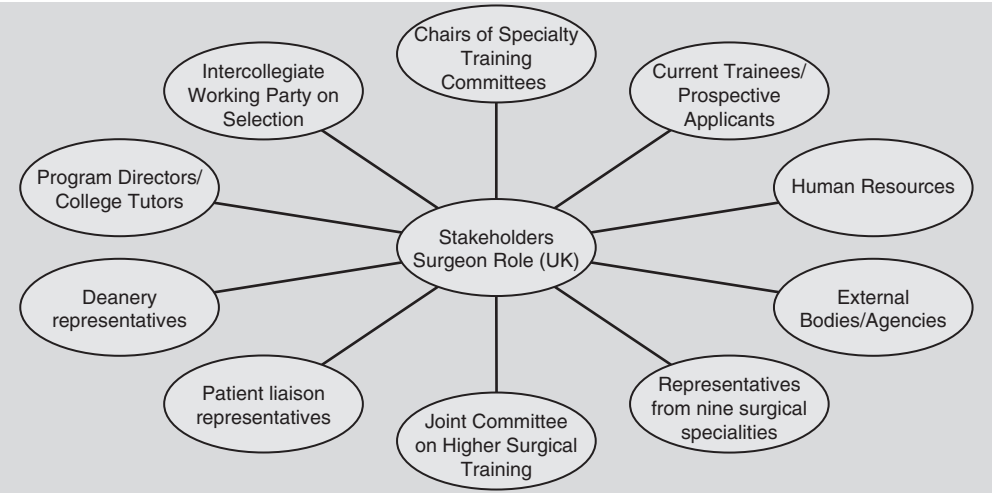

Figure 27.1 Stakeholder analysis for surgeon role (Patterson et al., 2006)

and focus groups were held subsequently with representatives from all of these groups to further scope the behavioural competencies. Lievens, Sanchez and De Corte (2004) suggest that one of the differences between competency modelling and more traditional job analysis is that the former ties job specifications more explicitly to the organization's strategy. What stakeholder analysis makes clear, however, is the existence of multiple sources of influence and power that can drive the definition of a role. Job analysis in most situations involves little more than a detailed investigation of an existing role in a hierarchy of roles within an organization. However, in the case of public sector reform many different groups have a vested interest in defining what future roles should involve. It is less straightforward than the simple top-down approach of defining work from a managerial perspective (Silvester and Dykes, 2007). At the very least stakeholder analysis enforces the need for researchers and practitioners to be explicit about whose views are being taken account of in shaping a particular job.

Nowhere is the involvement of multiple legitimate stakeholders more apparent than in the case of political roles: in the final case study I describe examples from my own work to map the Member of Parliament (MP) and local councillor roles.

Political competencies

Political performance has been equated historically with success at the ballot box. There has been little if any consideration of whether politicians need specific knowledge, skills or abilities to perform effectively. Yet, on resigning from her position as Secretary for Education, Estelle Morris, famously (and honestly) commented that she felt she lacked the skills necessary for the job. In 2001, I was asked by the director of development and candidates for the Conservative Party (the main right-of-centre political party in the UK) to advise them on how they might improve their process for selecting prospective parliamentary candidates. Their aim was to increase the number of women and ethnic minority candidates. Coming from a job analysis perspective, my first question was 'what are you looking for?' but quickly realized that there had been no previous job analysis for the MP role. Since then, I have found little evidence that any other political role has been subject to job analysis (which begs the interesting question 'why?'). This initial meeting led to a fascinating process of developing a

competency model for an MP. It involved undertaking a stakeholder analysis, followed by critical incident interviews with MPs, shadow ministers, party volunteers, party whips and members of the public, to capture what they considered to be the behavioural indicators of effective and ineffective MP performance (Silvester, 2003). These competencies and behavioural indicators were used subsequently to develop an assessment centre for approving prospective parliamentary candidates, and to conduct a validation study investigating the individual characteristics associated with performance in the 2005 General Election (Silvester and Dykes, 2007). A similar project was conducted for the Improvement and Development Agency, the main government-sponsored organization for developing capacity in local government, which scoped the cross-party skill sets for UK local councillors (Silvester, 2004). The resulting political skills framework has been used as the basis for development and review activities for local politicians across the political divide.

Both of these projects illustrate job analysis as a formative and iterative process. More specifically, because there had been no prior consideration of the specific knowledge skills and abilities required by politicians, and because the roles are unique in that they concern democratically elected individuals, it was particularly important to understand how different stakeholders construed the role. The generation of a competency framework and associated positive and negative behavioural indicators (see Box 27.2 for an example of the competency 'political understanding') provided an opportunity to capture and shape perceptions about what local councillors do. Interestingly, whilst politicians are elected and responsible to the people that elect them, most people have very little understanding of what politicians do. For example, there was a widespread belief that MPs are mostly involved in debating in the House of Commons. As such, it was assumed that barristers would make good politicians because they possess necessary public speaking skills. Not only can such a stereotype predicate against

BOX 27.2 Example of the Competency 'Political Understanding' for Local Councillors

(from Silvester, 2004)

Political Understanding: Acts ethically, consistently and with integrity when communicating values or representing political group views in decisions and actions. Works across political group boundaries without compromising values or ethics.

Positive indicators

- Actively represents group views and values through decisions and actions
- Helps develop political group cohesion and contributes to healthy communication between group and council
- Communicates political values through canvassing, electoral campaigning and by identifying new ways of engaging the public
- Committed to understanding local and national political landscape and developing own political intelligence
- Acts ethically, understands and communicates political values to others
- Works across group boundaries without compromising political values

Negative indicators

- Demonstrates inconsistent political values, lacks integrity and tends to say what others want to hear
- Has poor knowledge of group manifesto, values and objectives
- Puts personal motivations first, goes native or changes beliefs to accord with those in power
- Acts alone and fails to support group colleagues in public forums
- Fails to translate group values into ways of helping the community
- Lacks understanding of how central government policy impacts on local issues and council functioning

women, it also fails to incorporate other aspects of communication, including the need to adapt to different audiences, to listen, and to communicate effectively across different forms of media. Furthermore, the MP role has changed considerably, and is likely to change more illustrating the need for organizations to take a visionary approach in shaping job analyses to reflect what they believe a role should look like (Sparrow, 1995).

CONCLUSIONS

Lievens et al. (2004) claim that the scientific community has treated competency modelling with scepticism, because research evidence has lagged behind practice and because it lacks the rigour of more traditional job analysis. Yet, their argument is open to challenge on the basis of their assumption that job analysis should be reliable. That is, we cannot expect individuals to have the same experience of a role, nor for them to necessarily identify the same characteristics as being important. This is where the scientific approach, which conceptualizes a role as a fixed reality that can be reliably and objectively defined, runs into problems. As we have seen, roles are shaped and changed through the influence of different visionaries and stakeholders to the extent that they have the power to do so. Thus, 'reliability' may be an appropriate concept in an organizational context with a single powerful group, such as management, to define the role and control the experience of job incumbents through systems of performance review and reward. But in the case of public sector roles, where there are multiple legitimate stakeholders, including the public themselves, there are likely to be as many different views as there are stakeholders. In such cases, a qualitative approach that recognizes and seeks to accommodate these multiple perspectives is more useful. Job analysis, and in this instance competency modelling, should not be evaluated in terms of the extent to which it reliably samples equivalent views, but rather how effective it is at shaping multiple views into a shared understanding.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

Although the call to incorporate more qualitative research within organizational psychology is increasing (Fryer, 1991; Van Maanen, 1998; Cassell, Buehring, Symon and Johnson, 2005), considerable resistance still exists to the notion that organizational psychology is anything other than a science. Pfeffer (1993), for example, claims that only when the supporting *science* is secure can professional practice become effective. However, this is not simply an argument between researchers with competing epistemologies. There are also strong commercial interests based on the claim that a scientific approach can predict and enhance work performance. To understand why the quantitative approach dominates it is therefore important to consider why organizational research is being conducted and who ultimately it is for.

Hollway (1991) argues that it is important to consider how knowledge is created in organizational psychology in order to understand why certain approaches and models have been successful. She also argues for the need to acknowledge the social and political conditions important in producing such knowledge, thereby rendering explicit the political considerations of power and influence that are rarely considered by organizational psychologists. Hollway considers the lack of debate about the status of knowledge that makes up the field of organizational psychology to be the result of an uncritical identification on the part of researchers with the behavioural and natural sciences. Whilst this may well be the case, the scientific legitimization of organizational psychology is also popular among clients and practitioners, because according to a positivist model it is possible to uncover universal principles of workplace behaviour and use these to predict, shape and control performance. A multi-billion-dollar industry has developed based on this premise, with organizational

psychologists now working in some capacity in most large organizations. This success is in part due to the availability of methods for quantifying and comparing the effectiveness of individuals and practices: factors that have enhanced the power (and resources) of human resources (HR), traditionally one of the least powerful organizational functions.

Some of the tension between qualitative and quantitative perspectives can therefore be explained by the way in which research 'findings' are used in practice. Organizational research has commercial value and research findings represent a commodity. For example, results are often presented as 'evidence' that a particular approach works. That is, if an organization adopts this approach (which might be a stress management programme, a training intervention, selection process, or form of work design) they will be able to enhance performance, well-being, or some other factor relevant to achieving organizational objectives. However, the commercial value of the research (the extent to which an approach can be 'sold' to different organizations) often depends on the generalizability of these research findings. This is particularly apparent in the case of psychometric measures such as personality, work attitude or cognitive ability questionnaires, which are marketed on their ability to work equally well across different occupational and organizational domains. The ability to generalize findings to multiple work contexts fits with a scientific search for universal principles of behaviour. In comparison, qualitative researchers, who emphasize the uniqueness of individuals and work contexts, represent a potential challenge to these assumptions (Bartunek and Seo, 2002). For, example, if we conceptualize organizational culture as a socially constructed phenomenon that will vary both across organizations and within organizations over time, this represents a challenges to the commercial viability of psychometric tests that claim to measure culture across different organizations. Thus, resistance to qualitative research may be explained in part by the more attractive commercial proposition of quantitative methods and the scientific approach. To gain more popularity in organizational psychology, qualitative researchers may therefore need to emphasize the potential relevance of their work to a commercial as well as an academic audience.

For example, in his practitioner commentary on a special issue of the *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology* devoted to qualitative research Kandola (2000: 586) suggests that it is important to ask 'How have organizations benefited from this approach?' That is, where is the evidence that qualitative research has made an impact upon organizational effectiveness? Ironically, in the work context, where performance is quantified, compared against objectives, and equated to financial profit, qualitative research may need to rely on quantitative methods in order to demonstrate 'worth' and impact. However, Kandola's question also raises the issue of whether 'worth' is conceptualized in the same way by different stakeholders (e.g. managers, shareholders, employees and customers). For example, introducing a new work design that facilitates increased levels of production in manufacturing may be perceived as 'effective' by managers, but not by workers who find that they have less opportunity for social interaction in the workplace. Organizational psychologists rarely acknowledge the power and influence of different stakeholders when undertaking research and practice, nor the fact that there may be different and conflicting views about the 'effectiveness' of such work. Interestingly, however, King (2000) points out that in some quarters of discursive and rhetorical psychology the assumption that qualitative research *should* have an influence on practice has itself been strongly criticized. According to Widdicombe (1996) this would almost inevitably mean some compromise or acquiescence to the status quo and its dominant power relations, in this case a managerial perspective.

Despite the tremendous contribution of organizational psychology, Hollway is right to challenge organizational psychologists for their single-minded dedication to a

scientific approach. Person–job fit is based on the premise that it is possible to measure work performance, yet work performance is almost always defined from a managerial perspective. The most popular form of criteria for evaluating selection systems is managers' ratings of employee performance (Arvey and Murphy, 1998). 'Good' performance contributes to achieving organizational goals and, as such, is a constructed phenomenon shaped by the views of an organizational elite. However, one of the greatest challenges to the scientific approach in personnel selection is the pace of change that now exists in the workplace (Patterson, 2001). The success of matching people to jobs assumes that both people and jobs do not change. Yet organizations are now changing at an increasing pace, and job roles and employees must continually develop in order to cope with the changing demands of the workplace. Many selection and assessment methods have been criticized for being too rigid and inflexible to accommodate such change. Ironically, however, change and evolution are central to a constructivist perspective, and innovation and the future utility of organizational psychology in this area may well depend on incorporating more qualitative approaches. The future may be bright for qualitative research in this area after all.

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