Contributing to the bigger picture: How work and organizational psychology can inform policymaking for improving youth employment

Interview with Professor Rosalind Searle, Inaugural Director of EAWOP Impact Incubator, Professor in Human Resource Management and Organizational Psychology at the Adam Smith Business School, University of Glasgow, Scotland.

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About the interviewee

Rosalind Searle holds the chair in Human Resource Management and Organisational Psychology at the University of Glasgow's Adam Smith Business School. She is also director of the European Association of Work and Organizational Psychology's Impact Incubator, which translates scientific research in work psychology into practical ideas for policymakers and practitioners. She is a Chartered Occupational Psychologist and a Fellow of the British Psychological Society (BPS), and the Royal Society of Arts, and an academic fellow of the Chartered Institute of Personal and Development (CIPD). Her research focuses primarily on organizational trust, particularly the role of human resource management, change and decent work in organizational trust. She is an associate editor for Group and Organisation Management and the Journal of Trust Research, and her research has appeared in a range of leading international journals.

Introduction

Work and organizational psychology can have significant potential impact on the productivity and well-being of individuals and organizations. Although often our unit of analysis is at the individual-, group- or organization-level, we have substantial scope to influence policymaking. To this aim, in the 2019 Turin meeting, the EAWOP General Assembly decided to set up the EAWOP Impact Incubator (EAWOPii) initiative. In 2020 Prof Ros Searle was appointed as the inaugural director of the EAWOPii. Since her appointment, Ros has been busy appreciating what other people understand by work and organizational psychology (WOP), where we have particular voice and expertise, and thereby setting up a strategy for improving WOP's impact on society. The strategy is designed to make the science of work psychology more accessible to policymakers across Europe. EAWOPii translates WOP insights and evidence into plain language, and produces briefings directed at senior policymakers, and thereby informs, guides, and contributes to work-related policymaking in Europe. It therefore aims to become a 'go to' repository of WOP evidence-base for policymakers.

Young people have been one of the five key streams that Ros and her team have identified as a priority area where WOP has significant positive impact. Other streams where EAWOPii currently displays resources on are threats and securities, decent work, marginalised groups, women, and ethnic minorities. I spoke to Ros in April 2021 about why young people are an important stream for EAWOPii and how WOP science can further contribute to improve youth employment.

The interview

Belgin: *Young people have been identified as a key stream in the EAWOP Impact Incubator. Why is youth employment important for EAWOPii?*

Ros: What we are trying to do with the EAWOPii is to identify key topics, where we have (or the potential to have) greatest impact. Marginalised groups, such as young people, face the greatest challenges in terms of access to and experience of work, and therefore are at the risk of being left behind. This is particularly so in the current Covid-19 situation. We are trying to identify and provide resources for policymakers; to help them understand why youth employment matters. We have got such exciting science that shows how and why this matters. Our science shows, for instance, the mechanisms by which work can be made more meaningful, or how role identity development can be achieved at, and through, work for young people.

The previous recession in 2008-2009 showed to us what goes wrong for young people without access to work, in terms of their engagement in society. We were able to observe the added stress that joblessness creates, not only for young people themselves but, also for their families and, through that, into their communities and society as a whole. These issues are clearly highlighted in our Society of Industrial and Organizational Psychology (SIOP) youth employment white paper (Searle, Erdogan, Peiró & Klehe, 2014). In that paper, we discuss how youth unemployment is a global phenomenon that is adversely affecting young people across the world for a variety of reasons. A key argument we make is that it is something that we really need to pay attention to because otherwise it means that young people are stalled in their development into adulthood, and into becoming economically independent. It also means that if we don't do something about youth unemployment, their pensions are under-funded, and their life experiences and potential are under-developed. We are wasting all that talent. So, not surprisingly young people are feeling very dissatisfied and disengaged. This then means they could potentially become threats to society. If you look at political groups such as ISIS, they are often composed of young people, particularly young people who have been excluded from work and society; and are preyed upon by these groups. At the EAWOPii, we feel that work has a huge role to play in society, in giving people a sense of meaning, in validating them and making them self-confident, and reducing their stress. Particularly with young people, therefore, we really need to make sure that they are actively included in the labour market and in society.

Belgin: *How can WOP impact policymaking, and in particular help improve youth employment?*

Ros: It's about thinking about who the stakeholders are, identifying who would be interested in what you are researching. So, if we are talking about research looking at young people, we could think about education and training providers, employers, careers advisers or policymakers who might be interested in what you have got to say. It is important to connect with these stakeholders. Your research questions will be much better if they are informed by those who are working in the practice. It's about sharing your research and having those conversations to be able to shape your own research enquiry. This helps in identifying real world issues that people are facing. That way your research is not only much more exciting and impactful but also, you will actually be doing some cutting edge, topical research. Charis Rice and I wrote about it in a paper looking at impact in health services (Searle & Rice, 2020), in which we say it's about the dialogue between research and practice coming together, where policymakers and practitioners help us ask better research questions. They help us thrive as scientists because they push us to solve problems that matter to them. We have got so much we can help them with.

When I think about my own research journey in this field, it was about going to events where Human Resource (HR) practitioners were at (e.g., HR professional organizations, policymakers or regulators in a specific field) and asking questions. It can be very scary. But it is all about engagement and participation. So, through the EAWOPii, we will try to create opportunities for active engagement with policymakers. Personally, I was asked by the Professional Standards Authority to come and talk to them about trust because trust is a huge component of regulation. From that first engagement we started a voyage of many conversations. Initially I was part of a small event with many different people, including lawyers, HR professionals and regulators. That gave me opportunities to talk to people in different countries, who were interested in the things that I was interested in. From these initial conversations they moved on to fund our research (see Searle, Rice, McConnell & Dawson, 2017). Most recently, the Professional Standards Authority came and asked for insights to contribute to their Covid-19 response. So, I know from experience that those partnerships are very important. Understanding who are the key stakeholders and having conversations with them is important. It's a journey from research to impact.

One of the most important ways we can help improve youth employment is to engage with local authorities and schools. Work and organizational psychology can share

important insights, for instance on career decision-making, role modelling, job search and job choice. Sadly, particularly young people from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, often have no or limited access to work experience. So, if you are a young person, particularly a very able young person, you may be held back because you cannot navigate the labour market. You cannot easily answer questions relevant for your career development such as *How do I become a lawyer or an accountant*, because you have no role models, and you have no resources to help you understand how to become an accountant or a lawyer. As a result, these kinds of professions are often barred to people; not because of actual physical barriers but because of these knowledge barriers. Young people from disadvantaged backgrounds just can't navigate to some destinations because they start off in the wrong place. They are therefore more likely to make the wrong decisions, for instance in terms of the subjects they are choosing at school. They then end up in a maze of bad job choices, in which they get exhausted because it is not a good fit with their interests and capabilities. This makes them more likely to defer a less hard option, but in doing so they don't get to fulfil their potential.

If you look at what is going on with the current Covid-19 situation, the starter jobs that give young people work experience while at school, those have disappeared. So, what happens to young people who haven't had the experience of work? This will affect their choices about what they want to do and what they can do. Sometimes it's more about understanding what you don't want to do and why you don't want to do something, rather than what you do. When I look back over my life, I was all set to become an economist until I worked in an economics and finance office and realised that it was the last thing I wanted to do. It was only through that experience of doing the job, or trying out the job, that I learned.

In a previous role, we worked with a team of engineers. They were using engineering and science in primary school to inform the curriculum. As a result of that they were creating new ways for young people to explore engineering careers. This was aimed at particularly changing young girls' understanding and enthusiasm about sciences and engineering. They were enabling young people to see how they could use the things they were doing in the school and how these experiences would lead to jobs and occupations. These students were as young as seven or eight years old. It's about working with teachers, providing them with resources to show it's not only about the knowledge of engineering but, maybe more importantly, about young people's self-efficacy and confidence.

Often people from lower socio-economic groups do not have a financial buffer. If they make a mistake, then it has significant consequences for them. This often means that they can't pursue their dreams, if they have got to make big decisions such as how to pay off their student loans. If they don't see themselves in higher education and if they don't understand how to navigate to where their dreams may be, it is psychologically and financially safer for them to take a lower road into employment. Sadly, in today's labour markets, we know these roles are subject to obsolescence due to automation (e.g., in low-skilled manual work). It is important to build resilience in our society through education, through different provisions, so that young people have options; and can switch between different things. That means we need to think carefully about work.

Belgin: *How does the EAWOPii connect WOP researchers with policymakers and practitioners?*

Ros: We are creating resources. These resources will be briefings, cartoons, animations, anything that help distil the science into manageable chunks. These will be easily accessible on our dedicated website.

We will also continue to organise meetings. It is very important to have opportunities to engage with stakeholders and to pursue these opportunities. One of the things we can do better is around putting together steering groups. We can work with practitioners to carefully refine topics. An example is a research grant that I worked on about threats and security, we had stakeholders from a variety of different organizations. We came up with this toolkit. Yet, they were saying that they were interested in the most basic, the beginning bit, of our toolkit. Having those conversations, so you understand what works for the stakeholders and where they need your input, is very important. It is challenging. But if we can identify the right people for the steering groups, they can be hugely instrumental in taking your research to a different, much more informed place where you can have impact because they will be there opening the door.

We had similar engagement with our EAWOP Young People's Work, Employment and Careers Small Group Meeting (Okay-Somerville, Scholarios & Searle, 2020). We had stakeholders from many areas relevant for youth employment; along with representatives of careers practitioners, apprenticeship providers, policymakers, HR professionals, and WOP researchers. We created a really exciting opportunity. Each day of our five-day meeting began with hearing what policymakers and practitioners think are the key issues in youth employment from their perspective. Then in the second half of the day, we fed back our WOP research to them. When researchers were giving their talks they then

had, in the back of their minds, how have I addressed the points raised earlier by these stakeholders in my research. This was a good challenge for all involved. We saw this in the feedback we received. We just need to keep those conversations active as we go along with our research.

Belgin: *How can WOPs and stakeholders engage with the EAWOP Impact Incubator?*

Ros: We are just finishing our website (see https://www.eawopimpact.org/). This is going to have different streams of WOP research where we see impact, one of which will be youth employment. Each stream will have resources listed. If you see there are gaps in those resources and you think you can complement, please do get in touch with us. There will also be events coming up that researchers can take part in. These will include Small Group Meetings (SGMs). We would like to work with the organisers of the SGMs by adding new streams of information and resources. They are the scientists who know the stuff.

Similarly, practitioners and policymakers can get in touch on the Impact Incubator website to let us know of the topics they are interested in. The website offers an option to register, during which we also gather information on what different stakeholders are interested in and what they would like to see more of. We don't have all the answers. We have some of the questions we think are important. We have some of the resources. We are trying to understand the questions that people are interested in and make sure that we align these with the resources we have from our WOP science.

A better world for employees, makes a better world for families, makes a better world for communities, makes a better world for society. Work is a hugely undervalued way of helping financial capability but also mental health, identity, and well-being. Make sure to follow us on Twitter (@EawopI). There are some amazing resources we share there. This is a journey and we're on this journey together so come and help us be pilgrims. Come and help us work out how to make our story and our science hit that sweet spot!

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