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## Broadening the horizons of Work and Organizational Psychology



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# Broadening the horizons of Work and Organizational Psychology

## Editorial

Angela Carter

This, our *third issue* of *InPractice* in 2021, has much to celebrate. In Europe, and around the world, we are adapting and changing to live safely with Covid-19. We are starting to look a little more forward and wider; with eyes that see a little more colour and texture in the world based on our learning during lockdowns. Therefore, it is fitting that this issue focuses on *broadening the horizons of work and organizational psychology* enlarging our focus to other areas of study and endeavour.

With this issue we are also celebrating *15 years of InPractice*; and it is hard to believe I have been the editor of this journal for all those years. The European Work and Organizational Psychology in Practice (the original title) began its life as a burning theme of representing applied psychology in the mind of *Ute Schmidt-Brasse* from Germany, who I met at my first meeting with the EAWOP committee in Vienna. I shared her desire of wanting a vehicle to enable practitioners to publish and discuss their work. In 2006 issue 'zero' was published; and we are now at the 18<sup>th</sup> issue after that point. You will hear about the origins of our journal and fascinating reflections on a practitioner career, best practice and advice for new practitioners; as well as the founding of EAWOP and *InPractice* in an absorbing interview in this issue.

Over the years we have seen *InPractice* grow and gain in prominence. Much of this has been to do with the growing editorial team bringing new ideas and motivation to the publication. This growth was energised by the founding of the EAWOP *WorkLab* in 2012 and with Diana joining the editorial team. Shortly after we welcomed Colin and more recently Roman to the team. In this issue we welcome our newest editor Belgin who you may remember was the guest editor in our last special issue on *Young people, employment and careers*. In this issue, you will hear more of Belgin's exciting research in her *Research Spotlight* feature exploring *sustainable youth employment*. With such a strong group behind *InPractice* I knew it was time to step down as editor-in-chief and this will be my last issue in that role. Diana will commence as editor-in-chief at EAWOP's General Assembly in January 2022.

Returning to the focus of this issue we offer a fascinating interview with *Ingrid Covington* looking at broadening the horizons of work and organizational psychology. Ingrid describes her career enlarging from the traditional client focus to working with international security agencies like NATO and the Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE). Her focus has shifted to humanitarian work psychology, global security and well-being and she will describe some of this work during the interview. She also highlights several aspects of humanitarian psychology that are being presented and developed at the up-and-coming EAWOP Congress in Glasgow.

Our next paper offers a detailed case study of family businesses in Slovakia. Through careful quantitative and qualitative research *Denisa Fedáková* illustrates how work and family blend as both opportunity and motive for endeavour. This work spanned some of the most difficult of times during Covid-19 and the second phase of this study qualitatively explores these issues.

Following the theme of resilience introduced in Denisa's work we re-examine this concept in a case study by *Kathryn Waddington* and her colleagues from Westminster University, UK looking at compassion in an academic work setting. Using an action learning approach working practices are examined by the members of the learning set to explore how changes can be implemented that will reflect kinder, more compassionate ways of working for both staff and students.

Our final presentation adds another format to our papers introducing new psychometric instruments. Our *Tools* feature commences with the work of *Steve Woods* introducing the Trait Personality Inventory (i.e., Trait), a new form of digital personality profiling. Steve's work provides an overview of the Trait tool and its practical set-up, including reports that are available to practitioners. Besides providing an overview of reliability and validity evidence for the tool, the article provides examples of the tool being used in different sectors and assessment settings.

We are excited to see how InPractice has grown over the years and our team is committed to expand our collaboration with practitioners as well as grow our practitioner audience. To this end, we plan to introduce new formats that are relevant for practitioners such as the *Tools* feature and the *Research Spotlight* that inaugurated in this issue. In future issues we are hoping to offer *Book Reviews* to emphasise useful applied content; and we will be looking for reviewers. In the upcoming issues we will also explore podcast and video formats and we are open to suggestions regarding new formats that would be attractive to our readership.

We are looking forward to meeting you at our long hoped for EAWOP Congress in Glasgow in the New Year. There will be many activities to engage practitioners including our four interactive sessions making up the Science + Practice stream (S+P) on Thursday 13 January. Later that day is an InPractice event where you can meet all our editors and explore material that you may like to offer in future issues.



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# Living work and organizational psychology: A practitioner's retrospect and look ahead

Interview with Ute Schmidt-Brasse, founder of EWOP InPractice

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## Introduction and about the interviewee

Late October I had the honour of interviewing Ute Schmidt-Brasse here in the offices of Black Box / Open (BBO), Nürnberg, Germany. Ute had travelled 250 kilometres to see us from her home, and she was curious to see how Nürnberg had changed since she had lived and worked there in the 1970s for the Siemens company.

Ute is an enthusiastic work and organizational psychologist the retired owner of PSYCON Psychological Consultants Germany. Ute received her diploma in psychology majoring in Occupational Psychology at Munich University in 1973 and was certified as a Chartered Psychologist by the Professional Association of German Psychologists (BDP) and the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Psychologie (DGPs) as a Work, Business and Organizational Psychologist in 1990 (when this charter was created). In 1997 she was awarded a distance learning Total Quality Management certificate from the University of Kaiserslautern.

Ute put her academic training into reality by working as an employed psychologist in industry for several years before establishing herself under her logo PSYCON (Psychological Consultants) in 1988, specialising in personnel, team and organizational development, coaching and intercultural training. She worked with both large and small companies from heavy industry, chemistry, banking, insurance, as well as Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and charitable organizations – across all organizational levels. She also served as assistant lecturer with several German and East European universities. It was always crucial to her, in her work, to link practical application with up-to-date academic theory. From 1992 onwards she regularly participated in national and international conferences resulting in shared work reports and contributions to several books and articles. She was active until 2014 when she retired.

Since 1973 Ute has been engaged in the BDP Occupational Psychology section serving regionally and nationally. She was one of the German founding members of EAWOP and filled different functions within EAWOP (Executive Committee, Task Forces and founding and producing special issues of InPractice). In 2005 Ute was elected an Honourable member of the Ukrainian Association of Organizational and Work Psychologists, and in 2013 an Honorary Member of The Polish Association of Organizational Psychology. In 2008 she became an Honorary member of the section Work and Organizational Psychology of the BDP.

Ute has attended all the EAWOP congresses, being keenly involved in many activities, especially those involving practitioners. She is the co-founder of InPractice and in the interview you will hear about how the journal began.

Prior to the interview wanting to make this an interactive experience we introduced the BBO staff members describing their studies, position, tenure, and fields of interest. Ute introduced herself describing her career starting from studying Psychology in Munich, working in several (international) organizations and founding EAWOP and InPractice. We brainstormed questions with Mrs. Schmidt-Brasse noting these on the white wall and clustering them into themes (see Figure 1). These were: EAWOP; career path; advice for young consultants, managing challenging situations and favourite methods of working.

*Keywords:* work and organizational psychology, history of EAWOP, formation of InPractice, advice for young consultants, good working practice, the consultancy cycle, workplace change, career path

## The interview

**Colin:** *Today we have an honoured guest; Ute Schmidt-Brasse. You are warmly welcome here at BBO. It's a great pleasure to talk to you as you are the founder of InPractice; and we are now in the 15th edition. In this interview I would like to talk about getting in touch with EAWOP about practitioner events, about InPractice in general, and also about your work and your life as an organizational psychologist.*

*OK, first, I would be interested in how did you become a work and organizational psychologist?*

**Ute:** Well, I studied psychology and specialised in work and organizational psychology. I had the possibilities to do that because it was not very common at that time. When I started, in 1972, work and organizational psychology was a very new thing, with only one place where you could study, in Munich. Here at the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität, I studied with Professor Arthur Mayer and his team (Oswald Neuberger, Lutz von Rosenstiel and Karl Berkel). I also had the chance to attend lectures in work and engineering psychology at the Technical University, Munich. We were not too many people on the programme, and we got to know each other well; studying and eating together. This was one of the things that was very interesting for me because I really could take part in things and be involved with the Institute.

Figure 1  
Interviewing Ute (with permission)



**Colin:** *Can you tell me what drew you to wanting to work with the people in the first place; and how this influenced your practice?*

**Ute:** I always was interested in the different reactions of people to their surroundings and how they could be influenced to improve communication and cooperation. When I began working with a company I used to walk through the premises to meet people, so that I knew what they were doing, how they felt and what their language and their surroundings were like. I wanted to know *what they do*, *what they tell each other*, what is missing for them and what is angering them. All of these things I noted and used as a reminder for me.

I liked to spend my first day in any organization working with the people there; I got to know more about what is happening that way. Normally, I went with a superior and followed them wherever we went in their normal practice, and I had a look to what the employees did, and I listened to how they spoke. I also tried to understand what

techniques and processes were being used; and what they were working on. But, of course, they were the specialists!

In another company I worked with the people directly on a production line for 14 days. I got involved in their work process; making electrical equipment for washing machines. This way I really knew what they did, and how it felt, how it smelled and all these things. It was really interesting. Each person had their different job to do, and part to play in the process; and I had to get into that. And of course, I had to be quick, otherwise I would have slowed them all down on the production line. Not only did I work with the employees I was dressed like them, arrived at the beginning of the shift, and left at the end of the shift. Sometimes we went to have a drink together afterwards or something like that; so, I really joined in with this group. The production manager and his engineers were very impressed by this strategy because they saw that people got to know me and to trust me, and they started to ask me why certain things were happening in the workplace. This was really about trust building, which is very important for the psychologist. What was interesting to see was that many people don't think a psychologist is practical at all.

**Colin:** *That's a very good point. We have already put together some ideas that we would like to talk about. I kind of destroyed the procedure because it was one of the last questions – your advice for young consultants. I think it's a very good advice to give a young consultant to do exactly that: first, be part of the staff, mingle among the staff, talk to them, get in touch. So, what other advice would you give a young consultant?*

**Ute:** Firstly, not to give the impression that you think you are better than them. I think that's very important, not to be over-powering or over-bearing. Uh, I am just one of you – and I'm not better or more learned; because they know their work much better than you do. Also, to acknowledge that what they do is important so they really think we can do it together. That way you get to your goal much quicker than you would do otherwise. They must not feel like they are being taught; they must really feel they are being involved.

**Colin:** *Interesting, so even if you have an academic background and studied many complex things, it is important not let other people feel you have learned more than them; or have more insights into what is going on.*

**Ute:** Yeah, it's a bit difficult because they expect they will learn something from you. So, you should not show "Well, I'm better". But of course, on the other hand, they know

that I'm paid to offer knowledge and experience to help improve work performance. It's important to build understanding that what I bring is good for them. This will mean improvements afterwards, for instance, in method or strategy, or how to work and behave; because sometimes they have no strategy, and they just want to carry on doing what they have always done. But first, there must be appreciation; I'm a human being like you. And then, this is something I can bring to you, and you bring me other things, and together we will have valuable insights about your work.

**Colin:** *I get the concept and I experience similar things to give added value to the organization. It's all about valuing people and bringing some new ingredients into the organization that people can take and learn and thrive.*

*I would like to go back to the reason why we're here today. I'm a co-editor of In Practice and I'm very happy that we can talk about the origin of the journal. The first thing I would be interested in is how did you get in touch with EAWOP and when that was?*

**Ute:** I think it was in the late 1980s.

**Colin:** *How many people were involved in EAWOP at that time?*

**Ute:** Robert Roe from the Netherlands, of course, and Karel de Witte from Belgium and later José Peiro from Spain and quite a lot of other people. I got there standing in for Helmut Methner who was head of the Occupational Psychology section of the BDP at that time; and was engaged and responsible for the German input. There were several meetings that he was not able to attend so I went instead of him. And uh, well, I stayed there for quite a long time after that.

**Colin:** *Was that at one of the bi-annual congresses?*

**Ute:** No, this was before those 'official' bi-annual congresses – they were just meetings that today you might call a 'Task Force': collecting, considering, discussing suggestions and plans in order to attain a common goal: to build a European Association for Work and Organizational Psychology (EAWOP). There were only three country associations represented at the beginning: Britain, The Netherlands and Germany – and additionally France. Some of these meetings became two-country conferences (e.g., German-Dutch, French-German). There had been previous conferences in Nijmegen, The Netherlands (1983), Aachen, Germany (1985), Antwerp, Belgium (1987) and Cambridge, UK (1989). It was at a conference in Rouen, France in 1991 when the preparing group put this all together; and this was the official start of EAWOP.

There were several arguments as you would imagine: about the official language of the association (English), with discussion of second and third languages (French and German, but this would have been too expensive to translate all the sessions); and the cost of membership (too expensive for some countries compared to their available resources). These were dark points in the history of the founding, trying to keep every country association on side. Unfortunately, we lost some of the French colleagues, who wished to concentrate on the French speaking Association Internationale de Psychologie du Travail de Langue Française (AIPTLF).

**Colin:** *My first EAWOP Congress was in 2013 in Münster, and although InPractice already existed, it was only later I found out that there was as a journal for practitioners. Perhaps you can tell me about how the journal started.*

**Ute:** Yes, EAWOP already had one journal; but I must go back a bit further. EAWOP is an organization in its foundation made for both academics and practitioners, in order to stimulate the co-operation between scientists and practitioners working in Europe in the field of work and organizational psychology. But if you look closely, you always see many more academics than practitioners. For quite a time Henry Honkanen from Finland and I were the only practitioners in the Executive Committee (EC); for about eight years. Then Angela Carter joined the group, and she was half a scientist and half practitioner. Both of us wanted something that serves the practitioners: that was the roots for InPractice. EAWOP's EC asked me to think over what we could do and how it could be done. At first, I was on my own, but then Angela came to help me with her views. I had one intern with me at that time and together the three of us started to pin down ideas and actions which I presented at the next EC meeting. We had a suggestion for the logo, too. Well, it was a bit different to how it is to now, but you must start somewhere.

I had the thought that this journal could be something which brings academics and practitioners together in common tasks. For example, a practitioner activity of mine could be examined by an academic colleague; we could discuss it and they could give advice or offer some measurement to support my work. Or the other way round: I would try to apply their theoretical input and we would evaluate the outcomes. In this way there could be a discussion between theory and practice which hitherto had been missing. The bridge over the gap is not always there. I had suffered some bad experiences in this direction, and so I thought it was important to bring theory and practice together and make them work together and benefit from each other.

**Colin:** *This is a strong and important perspective, and I can assure you that the energy you put in with Angela is still there. There are a lot of things going on in this direction. For example, in 2019, when we had our last conference in Turin, we had a large kind of Bar camp; an open space event.*

**Ute:** Yes, I was there, and we met.

**Colin:** *So, you know that we try to get a lot of people together. Turin was successful, and people were telling us at the next congress we should do a larger event. This is the Science + Practice stream (S+P) that you will see in Glasgow on Thursday 13 January.*

**Ute:** Yes, but it's quite new; and we have been a little apart from each other for a long time. But I have the impression that it's really getting better, and academics and practitioners are understanding that they need each other. Because if an academic creates theories and doesn't put them into practice, they don't know the value of their theory; or should they continue with it or not? On the other hand, some practitioners may forget what they learned in their studies at university and do not keep in touch with theory and will just do what they think their clients want or think would be practical. I really don't think this is the job of a practitioner. They should be a scientifically trained person all the time; but not a scientist; and they should not forget that. And this must be the measure of their success as a practitioner.

**Colin:** *So, we are talking about the importance of evidence-based practice. Looking at our questions I would like to ask you what is your most favourite method you've applied?*

**Ute:** Well, it is the Problem-Solving Process. The idea is several years old, and although I haven't used it for a while its eight stages are still with me: a) analyse the situation; b) define your goal; c) look for alternatives; d) specify the goal to follow; e) execute the necessary paths; f) check and control; g) verify your results; and h) evaluate and give feedback.

I always tried to teach people this process and to follow it closely. But there are several 'light' versions by different people that are shorter and quicker processes; and they look smarter. This is when they don't think about situation and goal thoroughly and only a three-part circle emerges (task, execution and verification); and this is not enough. If you use the shorter approach you won't get to where you could get.

**Colin:** *So, it's like you will not be able to finish a triathlon if you just swim? And that probably applies to a lot of methods that if you take a shortcut, you will leave out something very important.*

**Ute:** Yes, I think the most forgotten thing is evaluation, in my view.

**Colin:** *We experience this quite often, when we have a workshop atmosphere, and everybody's engaged and energised; with lists of things and goal definitions. And then the next day, at work, with all the appointments, Zoom calls and team meetings; these plans just dissolve.*

**Ute:** I once made an experiment. I asked the owners of a company "Do you think that all your managers know what the company goal is"? They said "Yes, they all are working for it". Well, I said, "No, I don't think they know". We argued for a bit: and I suggested this activity. We asked all the employees write down what the goal of the company was and how to achieve it. The results were very interesting: There was no one set of statements that agreed. They mainly had something to do with goals, but none about how they should be met.

**Colin:** *We would get a similar thing if we asked some people in an organization what is their purpose? If you asked three different people you would get three different purposes or none, sometimes.*

**Ute:** Then you mustn't wonder that employees are not engaged with what they do and how they are directed towards the company's goals. It's not possible...

**Colin:** *So, the Problem-Solving Process is the idea behind the full range of goal setting; to include evaluating and redesign. If this is one of your favourite working models; what is your least favourite?*

**Ute:** Well, there are quite a lot of 'in vogue' things which I can't bear. I try to forget them as soon as I can.

**Colin:** *Let's look at another interesting question on the board: You've been in the arena of applying work in organizational psychology for how many years?*

**Ute:** Well, since 1973, when I made my exams.

**Colin:** *So, it's almost 50 years back...*

**Ute:** Well, in the last years I did not do so much....

**Colin:** *Let's call it four decades; that's a long time. My conclusion is that you liked it very much because you have done it for so many years.*

**Ute:** You are right – and I would do it again...

**Colin:** *Great, this links to another question. What would you have liked to change in your career?*

**Ute:** I would have liked to have been more part of the company and not a consultant from outside. I think I could do more important things and give more important stimuli if I was in the company because I would have known more about the processes and what happens. If you come from outside, you are not really a member of the process; you only look at cuttings and not the whole. I also would have liked to be in the company to be a valued part of it. Sadly, quite a lot of companies don't value what psychologists can offer.

**Colin:** *Yes, I get that it's not your motivation to be a fashion figure, a decoration of the management office. I agree also with the doubts you have, too. I once asked my mentor Klaus Moser, when I was early in my career, do you think I should be a consultant? Would it not be better if I would start in an organization and worked there for 15 years and then become something? He said, I understand your perspective; but it's a matter of sample size. If you begin as a consultant, you're going to meet a lot of organizations, see many different perspectives, maybe not so deep, but still, you have the chance to get in touch with many organizations. While, if you start one organization, your sample size would just be one. This helped me to overcome that inner conflict.*

**Ute:** With me, I was in three companies before I was a freelance consultant. I think that was good, because of course, you get quite a lot of perspectives and learn how to help people solve their problems and so on. But afterwards, I think I would have liked to go back into a company and...

**Colin:** *Changed it from the inside out?*

**Ute:** Yes, yes. If it is necessary, of course.

**Colin:** *But to be a member of the organization and to be a part of the change.*

**Ute:** Yeah. Because I think you get more trust if you apply these methods – and at the same time, you suffer the same. Otherwise, they could say: *"Ja, die hat gut reden und muss es nicht selber durchmachen!"* ("Well, she can tell us much but needs not go through it!")

Further, psychologists must understand the business perspective. I remember one top manager who said to me: *"Say it in money – say it in dollars!"* That was the management perspective. And of course, as a consultant, you must think this way, too.

**Colin:** *What I find particularly difficult, and maybe our readers find it difficult, is to translate psychological methods into everyday language. How do you do that? How do you get people excited about psychology in the workplace?*

**Ute:** As we said in the beginning of our talk: use their language, their 'pictures', and their narratives. And to be enthusiastic yourself is one of the most important things. I remember, I was at a party, and somebody asked me what I did as a psychologist; and what I loved about it. I told them about my work and what I could do and what benefits they could get out of it, and so on. And afterwards, one of these people came to me and said; "Well, is that really what you do?" And I said "Yes, of course". They said "Would you please come into my company? And help me do this?" It's the best thing of all; to really show them you love your work; and believe you can really change things.

Of course, you must be always up to date with methods and processes. That's why I always try to get new information and learning. In addition to my university studies, passing and applying my Advanced Diploma in Housekeeping (comparable to a master craftsman in industry who is allowed to instruct and train apprentices – a special German system) was one of the things that brought me a lot of insights; another was the Quality Management Certificate at University of Kaiserslautern.

**Colin:** So, you are saying life-long learning is important?

**Ute:** Yeah.

**Colin:** For example, the EAWOP Congress is a perfect environment for that. We appreciate the work so much because we have the chance as practitioners to come together with scientists, with practitioners, and with people who share similar views and concerns. Yeah, and to come up with new ideas.

**Ute:** Yes, I agree and since they have existed, I have been to every EAWOP Congress; and that's quite a lot.

**Colin:** And they are a lot of fun, aren't they?

**Ute:** Yes, of course.

**Colin:** I would like to ask you how to get people excited about your work and to get people engaged? We were talking about some differences in perspectives of how people in organizations have perceived psychologists maybe 20 years ago and today. But what I find particularly interesting over those 40 years, if you go back, is what were the problems that organizations had and what are the problems now? So where are the similarities and the differences?

**Ute:** I think one of the problems now is that nothing is sure; you don't know what is going to happen tomorrow. So, what you need to do tomorrow can be different. I think it's very important to make companies more flexible and adaptable, and not to think along rigid lines; that things must always be done like this.

**Colin:** *So, there is no one way to success?*

**Ute:** No. Perhaps there are other ways to achieve the same results. We don't know; but we must try it. I think this was something which was not thought about when I started.

**Colin:** *Is it the thought now? Is there a broader perspective on innovation and trying different things and be open towards others' views?*

**Ute:** Well, now I only can say what I read, and I have the impression that some companies understand. But not all of them; depending on their size and the age diversity of the employees. I think things are getting more flexible. If I look at my sons, for instance, who are in companies, and they will share these thoughts.

**Colin:** *So, today you think organizations may hold a broader perspective on people, and on creativity; along with self-management and self-determination in organizations. But these influences stem from psychology and how this has been applied in organizations...*

**Ute:** Well, look at the things that have happened since we have been living with Covid-19. This has opened up and changed the workplace more than anything else has done for 40 years. This style of working is something we have been trying to get it introduced into companies, for years.

**Colin:** *So, all we needed is a virus!*

**Ute:** And now it happens. I think there is the development. Not only change, but development also.

**Colin:** *So, rapid change needs crisis first.*

**Ute:** Not necessarily. But sometimes it helps, yes.

**Colin:** *So sadly, we must think about the end of our talk. I would like to ask you something that everyone here is keen to know; and indeed, so will the readers of InPractice. What is your advice for life and happiness? So, what is your secret for being happy, staying happy?*

**Ute:** To be realistic, I think; and not to want too much. But, on the other hand to want to do new things, too. And not to forget to think about what you can do for yourself, I think this is very important; because if you don't trust and take care for yourself, how can others trust you? It's not possible. Also, don't always have in mind what could be bad; or what could go wrong. We need to trust in future; and be positive thinkers.

There's a word from William J. H. Boetcker (often misattributed to Lincoln) who in his "10 Cannots" 1916 said: *"You cannot help men permanently when doing for them what they can and should do for themselves."* This is something I often had as a picture in my PowerPoint slides. And I think it's very important for leadership, communication, cooperation and so on.

**Colin:** *So not setting your own standards too high and noting the standards of others. But if your standards are too low you might not be motivated...*

**Ute:** ... and then don't get where you could go.

**Colin:** *So, on the other hand, you need to be able to envision what can happen in the future; and then keeping a balance of dreaming what you could do but, not expecting too much from yourself.*

**Ute:** Yeah, some people would say this is work life balance.

**Colin:** *Speaking of work life balance – I thank you very much for the interview; I hope you haven't perceived this as too much like work. More as part of your life. I have also learned that Nuremberg has been a part of your life; so, have a great weekend.*

**Ute:** Thank you.

Figure 2

Concluding our interview with Ute (with permission)



## Participant evaluation

After writing up the interview I asked the staff at BBO how they found their experience. Their response was that they had all had an inspiring dialogue with Ute. There was lots of valuable advice from an experienced practitioner for every one of us. We are very thankful that she came a long way from her home to our office in Nuremberg to meet us.

Ute has encouraged us to be persistent, confident, and willing to be part of the organizations that we work with. She particularly emphasised the value of a deep dive into organizations culture and functioning. This is something we want to reinforce in our practice even more in the future.

# What can human resource management tell us about sustainable youth employment?

Belgin Okay-Somerville



**BELGIN OKAY-SOMERVILLE**

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## About the author

**Belgin** is a Senior Lecturer in Human Resource Management at the Adam Smith Business School, University of Glasgow, Scotland, UK. She has trained as a psychologist and specialised in industrial/organizational psychology in her master's degree.

Belgin's doctoral research was in a business school context and examined job quality, employability and career mobility in contemporary graduate labour markets. Belgin is an Academic Member of the Chartered Institute of Personnel Development, youth employment lead at the European Association of Work and Organizational Psychology (EAWOP) Impact Incubator, and Committee Co-Chair at the Academy of Management Teaching and Learning Conference. Her current research interests centre on career development, skills use and development, employability, job search and well-being, with a particular focus on young people. Following guest editing the Special Issue on Young people's work, employment and careers, Belgin has recently joined the editorial team of *InPractice*. This research spotlight aims to introduce Belgin's current conceptual work in progress on youth employment.

*Keywords:* Youth employment, human resource management, sustainable careers, good and meaningful work, human sustainability

## Introduction

In June 2020, together with Professors Dora Scholarios and Ros Searle, I organised an EAWOP and Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) funded small group meeting (SGM) on young people's work, employment and careers. This SGM brought together academics, practitioners and policymakers over the period of a week to discuss youth employment challenges. On the final day of the SGM, we focused on key take-home messages and questions that remain unanswered. Participants agreed that a systems approach, which includes multiple stakeholders, is fundamental in tackling the youth employment challenges. After all, the challenges we heard about during the week were multi-faceted. Just as it 'takes a village' to raise a child, it takes a community approach to tackle youth employment challenges. Yet, most national governments place more emphasis on the supply of work- and career-related skills to labour markets by individuals and education providers, than they do on employers' demand for developing and utilising these skills. After making this observation I became interested in understanding employer motivation for youth employment.

Young people are increasingly under pressure to gain qualifications and to aim high and raise aspirations. Yet qualifications are not sufficient to guarantee access to good work that will provide skill use and development. Academic qualifications are increasingly used by employers as a screening device during recruitment and selection to eliminate less suitable candidates but evidence of relevance of these qualifications on the job is not clear for most (Okay-Somerville & Scholarios, 2014; 2017). In other words, qualifications may be needed to get the job, but not necessarily to do the job well. For instance, we have observed, in the past three decades, the expansion of higher education across the developed and developing world. Yet, this expansion, rather than levelling the field for young people in the labour market, has contributed to much underemployment, overqualification, reinforcement of inequalities and mental health problems, with little evidence of employer initiative to absorb this highly skilled workforce (e.g., by job creation or redesign). In fact, my doctoral research showed that university graduates were increasingly employed in intermediate-skilled (technicians and associate professional) occupations which are now referred to as the 'new' graduate occupations. Yet, job quality in these occupations were significantly different from that in traditional graduate occupations, especially in terms of skill requirements, skill use and development, autonomy over work and pay (Okay-Somerville & Scholarios, 2013).

Some employers intentionally do not employ young people. In the UK, in reaction to the Covid-19 pandemic, in 2020, only 46 per cent of employers planned to recruit young workers and 25 per cent definitely did not intend to do so (CIPD, 2020). Most active labour market policies focus on either increasing human capital or are concerned with rapid labour market entry, yet we know very little about how long-term sustainable employment and careers can be supported (Fuentes, McQuaid & Robertson, 2021).

This research spotlight aims to contribute towards facilitating *sustainable youth employment*. It explores how sustainable youth employment can be supported through management of young people at work. In the following sections, I introduce youth employment as a sustainability problem and illustrate what sustainable youth employment may look like. I then explore the role of human resource management for supporting sustainable youth employment. Finally, the conclusion reflects recommendations based on this novel conceptualisation.

## Why is youth employment a sustainability problem?

Although 'youth' is a transitional phase (from being young into adulthood) youth employment has long-lasting impact, that depletes crucial individual, social and economic resources. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2021), we are currently experiencing a global youth employment crisis: across the globe, 68 million young people are unemployed, 123 million are in working poverty and 270 million are not in employment, education or training (NEET). Youth unemployment is associated with lower lifetime earnings, higher incidence of later unemployment and mental health problems and reduced life chances (McQuaid, 2017). Another key outcome of not getting youth employment right is associated with exclusion from society. For instance, youth unemployment has been found to be consistently related to criminal damage and robbery, regardless of gender and ethnicity. Finally, youth unemployment and underemployment indicate underutilisation of crucial resources and has implications for nations' labour productivity and prosperity.

Young workers are the future of work. As we are witnessing in relation to the Covid-19 crisis, young people are often the most vulnerable to uncertainty and economic downturns; they lack the human and social capital required for ensuring sustained employability. Young people who are currently struggling to access work will form the majority of the labour market in the coming decades. These young people will join labour markets with financial, career-related and psychological scars which may impact their long-term happiness, healthiness and productivity. The youth employment crisis therefore poses a sustainability threat to individuals' careers, availability of knowledge, skills and ability in labour markets and to nations' prosperity. In relation to youth employment, sustainability is concerned with guarding future generations' well-being and productivity (Anand & Sen, 2000).

Sustainability within organizational settings is often studied in relation to economic and/or environmental performance. The importance of human sustainability is highly relevant for studying youth employment considering the multiple negative effects discussed above. Youth employment can therefore be problematised as a human sustainability challenge – which is relevant for preserving young people's adaptive capacity for the future, in the form of fewer labour market vulnerabilities and higher resilience to unexpected career shocks.

## What does sustainable youth employment look like?

Sustainable employment has been conceptualised in different ways according to the context within which it is studied, for instance in reference to the ageing workforce. From a broader perspective, the notion of sustainable careers refers to sustained employability in the labour market (Lawrence, Hall & Arthur, 2015). Considering the uncertain and volatile contemporary labour markets, sustainable employment requires: a) renewal opportunities to reflect on and consolidate careers and to prevent burnout; b) flexibility and adaptability through continuous learning; and c) integrity and integration of careers with different spheres of life for a meaningful experience (Newman, 2011). To define sustainable youth employment more specifically, a good starting point is to consider what we know about youth employment.

Young people are subjected to increasing precarious employment, which is commonly characterised by low-pay, poor skill use and development opportunities, lack of choice/control over employment options, employment rights, and psychological empowerment through work with little/no social protections. Young people are often employed in atypical contracts that are inherently insecure, such as zero-hour contracts where there are no guaranteed hours of work, or bogus self-employment, where they do the same work as employees but are categorised as self-employed and therefore do not benefit from employee rights and social security (ILO, 2020). Such unpredictable and insecure working patterns puts young people under risk of financial and social insecurity, as their ability to pay basic living and housing costs is constrained and they become more likely to rely on third sector organizations for these needs, such as foodbanks (Buzzeo, Byford, Martin & Newton, 2019). Young people's precarious employment is not sustainable as often they find themselves in a cycle of low-quality work and financial insecurity and/or being transferred from one training provider to another without opportunities for gaining work experience (Suttill, 2021). Frequent experience of precarious employment may in fact further exacerbate some of the key barriers to education, employment or training that young people experience, such as lack of meaningful labour market experience, financial pressures, poor self-esteem, and limited ability to travel due to lack of financial resources.

Judging by what we know about young people's precarious employment, I propose that sustainable youth employment affords young people with psychological, social and financial securities/safety-nets. Broadly defined, sustainable youth employment can be conceptualised as work that allows young people the ability and motivation to maintain

or change jobs in ways that foster positive work-related attitudes and well-being, and perceived productivity through work. More specifically, young people's sustainable youth employment will be characterised by certain key job characteristics that persist overtime across employment episodes, including decent (living) wage, opportunities for skills and career development and worker rights (e.g., pension entitlement and collective representation) and will have positive impact on employee well-being. This operationalisation of sustainable youth employment is also in line with what we know of young people's work-related preferences. Although young people are often stereotyped for their lack of commitment to work, our empirical research based on European Working Conditions Survey data shows that job security and traditional career progression opportunities, as well as skill use and meaningful work are among their top job- and career-related preferences – and more so after the 2008/9 Great Financial Crisis (e.g., Okay-Somerville, Scholarios & Sosu, 2019). We might explain these preferences for sustained employment using Inglehart's (1981) scarcity hypothesis, which argues that those features of work that are rare in availability gain more importance as work values. Considering that today's 16- to 24- year-olds' formative years relevant for most developmental milestones, including work-related identity development, were realised in the shadow of the insecurity of the 2008/9 Great Financial Crisis, young people's preference for opportunities to grow through work and security are not surprising.

For understanding young people's perspectives on sustainable youth employment, I have commissioned the European Youth Parliament UK (EYPUK) to produce a resolution booklet to tackle the question of *How can Europe ensure young people are provided with meaningful employment options?* (EYPUK, 2021). Mimicking the workings of the European Parliament, the EYPUK employment and social affairs committee, chaired by Andra Tofan, came together during their annual national session in July 2021 and agreed on resolutions to address this question. Some of the resolutions confirm the dimensions of sustainable youth employment conceptualised in this Research Spotlight:

- establishing an independent, non-ministerial, governmental body to ensure good working conditions and leadership standards;
- incentivising internal mentorship training programmes to support young people at work;
- incentivising job retention and youth employment schemes;
- prioritising mental health at work;
- implementing public information campaigns which raises awareness of the dangers of age-related stereotypes on young people's employment prospects

and the importance of inclusive youth employment for prosperity of individuals, organizations and nations;

- integrating notions of employment rights, the future of work and healthy working environments into school curricula; and
- capping the proportion of jobs replaced by artificial intelligence to preserve entry-level opportunities relevant for skills development for young people.

Beyond access to employment, the above conceptualisation of sustainable youth employment places management of young people in the workplace in its centre. The next section considers the role of human resource management and possible tensions in the employment relationship for facilitating sustainable youth employment.

## **Human resource management and sustainable youth employment**

Human resource management (HRM) is concerned with ‘anything and everything associated with the management of the employment relationship in the firm’ (Boxall & Purcell, 2003, p.184). Whether young people are subject to precarious or sustainable employment opportunities is therefore an HRM choice that managers make and implement.

Employing young people presents risks to organizations. This is because young people, although increasingly formally qualified, lack experience and associated human, social and career capital. Sustainable youth employment, as defined above, requires that organizations invest in young people’s skill use and development, as well as providing opportunities for career progression. This kind of investment then presents costs for organizations, which most active labour market policies try to counter by financially incentivising the employer to subsidise this expense. Youth employment is perceived as particularly costly in economic and social regimes that rely on short-termism in management. Organizations in these regimes often seek previous work experience in filling vacancies, where employees can ‘hit the ground running’ and be productive from day one, rather than taking a longer-term approach to ‘grow their own’ by providing training and development opportunities through employment. Not surprisingly, although most managers agree that they have a duty to develop young people’s skills, they also need to be assured of a business case for doing so (Hasluck, 2012). The business case for youth employment is often presented in financial outcomes. For instance, reduced recruitment and staffing costs and increased flexibility associated with employing young people have been demonstrated. More indirect reasons through which young people contribute to financial outcomes include, but are not limited to, the

innovation and creativity they bring into the workplace, willingness to learn, diversity of perspectives, technical skills and workforce planning (Hasluck, 2012).

### **Financial goals of the organization**

Investing in sustainable youth employment may create tensions for achieving financial outcomes depending on the organization's strategic focus. For instance, in the UK, a growing polarisation has been observed in the quality of jobs: where a high proportion of jobs are in the lower and higher ends of the skills spectrum. An organization's skills composition therefore denotes its approach to productivity: 'low-road' vs 'high-road', respectively. In this context, young people are disproportionately employed in sectors that take a 'low-road' approach and depend primarily on low-cost competition, via low-skilled work. Employees in organizations that adopt the 'low-road' approach are likely to be subject to precarious employment. Especially in liberal economies, such as the UK, young people tend to be overpopulated in the service sector (e.g., in hospitality, food and accommodation) which inherently offers low-paid work and non-traditional contracts (O'Reilly, Grotti & Russell, 2019). Hence, young people, although increasingly highly educated and skilled, are experiencing growing overqualification at work and precarity in working conditions (Lodovici & Semenza, 2012). There is some evidence that for some employers these adverse working conditions improve labour productivity for achieving economic goals (Verhaest, Bogaert, Dereymaeker, Mestdagh & Baert, 2018). Sustainable youth employment may not be compatible with low-cost business strategies.

Organizations that take a 'high-road' approach to productivity, either through differentiation in the market or creating a niche focus, may be more likely to offer sustainable youth employment, as these organizations tend to rely on employee commitment and involvement for higher performance. However, it may be more difficult for young people to secure work in these organizations, as there is likely to be high applicant-to-vacancy ratios, and especially if they lack crucial employability and career-development skills (Atilla Bal, 2020). A clear example of this is observed in graduate employment. Many university leavers find that there are more applicants than vacancies in the top graduate employers which offer structured training and development opportunities and develop their own future leaders.

## Non-financial goals of the organization

Recent discussions of HRM acknowledge the non-financial goals of organizations, which are relevant for sustainability. In this vein, sustainable HRM is defined as “people-management practices that take the development of social, environmental and human capital into account” (Guerci & Carollo, 2016, p. 212). A recent review of sustainable HRM (Aust, Matthews & Muller-Camen, 2020), distinguishes between HRM systems that treat sustainability as a ‘means to an end’ vs ‘an end’ in their own right. More specifically, Aust and colleagues (2020) argue that some sustainable HRM models (i.e., socially responsible HRM, green HRM and Triple Bottom Line HRM) are models of managing people where financial purpose of the organization is key to all activity. By contrast, Common Good HRM models show substantial deviation from these mainstream ideas and assume that the primary purpose of the organization is to make positive contributions to collective sustainability challenges we are experiencing (Dyllick & Muff, 2016). Within this type of organization, financial outcomes become means for achieving social and/or environmental sustainability goals.

Although sounding rather utopian to many, examples of such organizations are listed under the Economy for Common Good initiative, which proposes an alternative economic model based on “a good life for everyone on a healthy planet” (Economy for the Common Good, 2021). The Economy for Common Good aims to change the economy in several ways, one of which is the creation of ‘good and meaningful jobs’. Muller-Camen and Camen (2018) describe how Sonnentor, an organization listed under the Economy for Common Good, prioritises employment creation by resisting automation of low-skilled production work. Similarly, the Conscious Capitalism initiative offers a new way of thinking about capitalism that is based on a higher purpose than making profits. I argue, based on sustainable HRM literature and these encouraging initiatives, that sustainable youth employment will be more likely in organizations with social sustainability purpose.

It is evident in Aust et al.’s (2020) reviews that financial goals, and social and environmental goals are not mutually exclusive in organizations. Most organizations will have some degree of concern for social and environmental purposes. Yet, how this manifests in engaging with young people is crucial for my arguments. For instance, in my informal discussions with employers who actively support youth employment, one employer in the information communication technologies industry mentioned that they actively and intensively engage with youth employment by school and university

recruitment visits, making quotas for young people in their organization and providing elaborate skills development programmes. When discussing the reasons, alongside altruistic reasons of a perceived duty of developing the next generation of IT developers, they also mentioned that these activities ensure a healthy and productive talent pool that they can tap into, even if these young people do not end up working for them.

In recent years, I started incorporating some of these ideas on sustainable HRM and alternative economic models to my strategic HRM teaching at the University of Glasgow. The classroom discussion that follows is fascinating; some students take Sonnentor to be a fictional organization, others question how the state may be incentivised (or not) to support such systems and while yet others raise reasons why these ideas will not translate to the 'shop-level' because that is where line managers or direct supervisors make day-to-day decisions. These intriguing discussions led me to further expand my exploration on understanding employer motivation for sustainable youth employment to consider the role of direct line managers.

### **Implementation of organizational goals**

Line managers play a key role in implementation of organizational purpose (Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007). With regards to sustainable youth employment, we can expect line manager attitudes towards young people to play a key role in both recruitment and selection of young people and their development through work. My ongoing research with Dr Esra Atilla Bal shows stark differences in young people's self-report data on their soft skills, personality and work values with employers' judgment of these (Okay-Somerville & Atilla Bal, 2021). This draws attention to two plausible explanations: that either young people lack self-awareness and/or that managers are biased in their judgment of young people's capabilities. In fact, the Chartered Institute of Personnel Development (CIPD, 2011) concludes that 'young people are from Mars and employers are from Venus' when it comes to experiences during recruitment and selection. A plethora of research has been conducted on young people's career skills and competencies, which also includes reflecting on one's preferences, strengths and values. There is evidence that some employers may hold negative views about employing young people due to the financial risks mentioned above and also some stereotypical assumptions about young people being unreliable and lazy (Suttill, 2021).

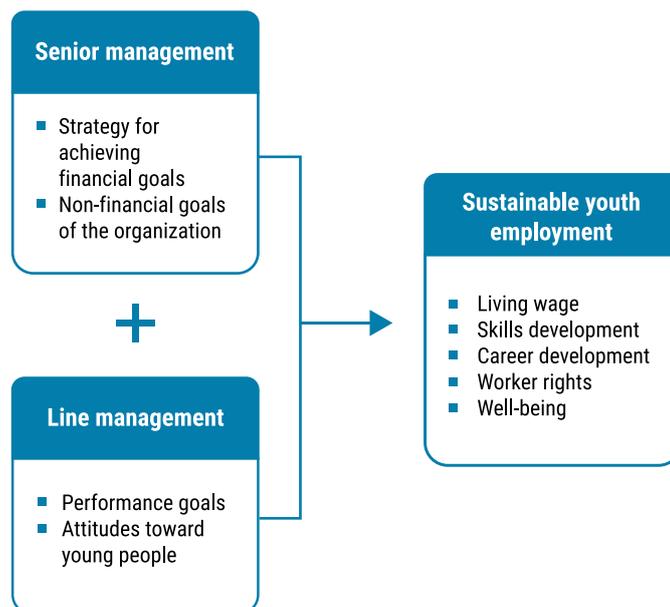
Managers' assumptions about young people and how this influences young people's sustainable employment outcomes (e.g., in terms of opportunities for training or employee rights) is not well understood. Research based on model of culture fit

(e.g., Kanungo, Aycan & Sinha, 2020) shows that organizational culture not only impacts managerial employee-assumptions but also how HR practices are implemented. For some line managers, providing sustainable youth employment may create tensions with their own performance targets and/or purpose even when organizational purpose may be strong, whereas others may hold strong views on supporting youth employment even when organizational purpose may be purely financial. Hence, I argue that understanding sustainable youth employment from a human resource management perspective requires understanding both HR intentions (at senior management level) and HR implementation (at line management level).

## Summary: HRM strategy and implementation

My arguments on defining sustainable youth employment and how HRM may be relevant for understanding sustainable youth employment provision within organizations are summarised in Figure 1. This shows that at the senior management level, organizational strategy and purpose matter for sustainable youth employment. Building on what we know about the relationship between organizational strategy and HRM, my first argument is that organizations that take a low-road approach and compete on low-cost basis may be more likely to employ young people (e.g., in service sector) however are less likely to offer sustainable youth employment.

Figure 1  
Summary of HRM - Sustainable youth employment relationships



Drawing on Aust et al.'s (2020) distinction between models of sustainable HRM, my second argument is that sustainable youth employment will be more common among organizations that have explicit non-financial goals. These organizations may work closely with the community. This could be through third sector organizations that support young people. For instance, in the UK, we can expect provision of sustainable youth employment to be common among employers who signed the Good Youth Employment Charter which has been developed by Youth Employment UK (a UK-based charity). By signing this Charter, these organizations signal that they: a) create opportunities for young people; b) recognise the talent young people bring into organizations; c) understand the importance of fair employment; d) offer development of young people through work; and e) listen to young people's voice in the employment relationship (Youth Employment UK, 2021).

Finally, HRM implementation may differ from senior management intention of HRM strategy. Hence, my third argument is that line managers will play a key role in sustainable youth employment provision (alongside or despite senior management intentions). The best-case scenario here is when senior and line management are aligned in their interest for supporting youth employment. When there is misalignment, it is likely that line managers either cannot or will not provide support for sustainable youth employment.

## Conclusions

The arguments presented above suggest that in thinking about youth employment, we need to broaden our focus from access to work, to access to sustainable employment. Practically, this highlights the inefficiency of most active labour market policies for facilitating young people's work-related satisfaction, well-being and productivity. Theoretically, this shifts the youth employment lens to include employer practice as well as career guidance for young people.

As noted at the start, youth employment challenges require multiple stakeholders working together – perhaps despite tensions between their interests and goals. This research spotlight aims to highlight ways of involving a key, yet often neglected, stakeholder – the employer – in tackling youth employment challenges. There is plenty of room to expand both theory and practice, as our understanding of human sustainability grows.

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# Broadening the horizons of Work and Organizational Psychology

Interview with Ingrid Covington, Centre for Work Psychology,  
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## Introduction and about the interviewee

In September I had the pleasure of interviewing Ingrid Covington from her home in Mons, Belgium. Ingrid is a Chartered Psychologist (Health and Care Professions Council registered), Qualified Executive Coach, a member of the European Association for Aviation Psychology, the Society of Industrial and Organizational Psychology (SIOP), EAWOP and Project S.A.F.E. (more about this later). She has two decades of experience in industries and sectors from finance to international organizations (e.g., the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, NATO). She received the Practitioner of the Year Award (2010) from the British Psychological Society's (BPS) Division of Occupational Psychology (DOP). She served as the DOP Strategy Convenor and Conference Chair for a decade and was a Research Fellow at Birkbeck for two years. Ingrid is a reviewer for the BPS Professional Development Centre and is a member of the EAWOP Congress 2022 Organising Committee. Ingrid has been involved in much of the EAWOP congress organisation, particularly with the practitioner events. You will be meeting her in Glasgow.

When we spoke, Ingrid had just returned from a meeting with NATO officers keen to explore issues of national and cultural security. This is part of Ingrid's rich portfolio of work that spans many boundaries professionally, culturally and scientifically. You may wonder how an occupational psychologist (the UK name for a work and organizational psychologist) gets involved in such diverse work; well, the best way to explain is to start from the beginning.

*Keywords:* occupational psychology, work and organizational psychology, humanitarian psychology, humanitarian work psychology, global security, human security psychology, well-being

## The interview

**Angela:** *Please tell me about your career journey*

**Ingrid:** When I was in my final years at school in England, psychology was not available as a subject to study at Advanced Level. I was able to study sociology, and this enabled me to interpret my subsequent psychology degree through the lens of sociology. Once I gained my degree I was steered towards clinical psychology as this was a clearly defined career pathway – but, like many, I found this a highly competitive area with only a few funded positions being available in the UK National Health Service.

So, I decided to explore other areas of applied psychology. I took a master's degree in psychology at Manchester Metropolitan University, UK. Realising I needed to gain some solid work experience I started a graduate management trainee role for a large building society in the UK. This work gave me opportunities to manage others, work towards specific performance targets and to develop my leadership skills. All these areas are the foundation of work and organizational psychology; so, my next career steps were being formulated.

When I was working with the building society, they recognised the importance of having psychological input into a range of work areas; and I found myself being involved in several special projects. For example, when the results of the annual staff survey were available, I designed a series of interviews and focus groups with staff to explore what was behind these findings. Knowing what staff meant by their survey responses was particularly valuable to the organization who were looking to redesign their leader development to reflect a greater sense of worker engagement.

After being at the building society for five years I was headhunted by a London-based consultancy and studied part-time for a second master's degree in Occupational Psychology at Birkbeck College, University of London. My dissertation explored the role of *Workplace Social Inclusion* in a UK regional police force. The research findings highlighted the complex ways in which social context facilitates individual and organizational constructs. My research suggests that particular attention needs to be paid to the impact of dominant social cultures that may subtly exclude some people, particularly from minority groups. My findings were presented to senior members of the police force and resulted in an organization-wide cultural audit and review aimed at reducing institutionalised racism and socially conforming bullying behaviours.

**Angela:** *Tell me how and why your horizons of work psychology expanded?*

**Ingrid:** While I was studying for my master's degree, I joined a business consultancy; being only the second psychologist they had ever employed. In this role I was required to learn about business planning (e.g., Prince 2) and analyses, and this broadened my skill set. I worked with small and medium sized businesses and government organizations, particularly in areas of leadership development. One of the projects that expanded my horizons hugely was working with NATO. Here I experienced first-hand what it was like to work with a complex international military organization spanning 30 member nations and with many other partners. I was thrown into a different world of people;

mostly men, in uniforms, who were working towards a higher purpose that transcended national security by looking at all aspects of security including human dimensions. But underneath this complex facade was basic psychology about behaviours, forming relationships, examining cultures and developing mindsets. What many people don't realise is that the 1949 NATO Treaty signed by the founding members explicitly states that the purpose of the alliance is to promote stability and well-being in the North Atlantic area. The Treaty reaffirms collective 'faith in the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations and their desire to live in peace with all peoples and all governments' (North Atlantic Washington Treaty, 4 April 1949, p.1).

What was inspirational about this work was that it was informed by the United Nations report on human security (United Nations Trust Fund for Human Security, 1994) that encompasses so many aspects of everyday life. Human Security refers to a multifaceted and somewhat aspirational state whereby everyone has 'the freedom from want and fear to go about their daily lives with dignity and without harm' (United Nations Trust Fund for Human Security, 1994, pp. 5-7). Seven security dimensions were identified: a) personal security meaning living free from violence; b) health security encompassing protection from disease and infection, alongside access to affordable health care; c) food security entailing both physical and financial access to nutritious food; d) environmental security concerning the integrity and health of the physical environment; e) community security about safe neighbourhoods, and peaceful intergroup relations; f) economic security as a regular basic income; and g) political security ensuring basic human rights. Considering such a broad remit with a wide range of international partners took me straight back to the sociology I had studied and far away from working with just one organization focusing on the narrow aspects of profit or loss.

**Angela:** *Tell me about the Staying Well Together Programme that you founded at the NATO military base Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE)?*

**Ingrid:** In response, in part due to the pandemic and in part for the general need to support mental health efforts at a local level, I spearheaded a co-ordinated effort to help the local international community at SHAPE gain more access to, and awareness of, opportunities to maintain mental and physical wellness. This resulted in a volunteer-led comprehensive well-being programme supported by senior leadership called *Staying Well Together* at SHAPE. The programme involves designing and directing specific targeted campaigns, such as 'You're Not Alone', a community-wide initiative to provide social connections and support to address loneliness and isolation during Covid-19.

As part of the campaign, we produce flyers for every member of SHAPE informing them of well-being principles and activities to stay connected during the winter and Covid-19 restrictions. We have a huge banner announcing the programme that is clearly visible when you enter the secure compound (see Figure 1); along with content displayed on large LED screens all around the compound.

Authoring a monthly column in the SHAPE Community Life Magazine allows me to feature mental health-focused articles and studies, events and activities engaging all international members of the community. The primary goal of the campaign is to facilitate and create opportunities for individuals to make meaningful connections with other members of SHAPE. The thought behind this is that by strengthening the psychological safety and security of the community, the resilience of the NATO Alliance is reinforced.

Figure 1

Poster announcing the You're Not Alone campaign with sponsors: Regimental Sergeant Major Theresa Newell (left), Lieutenant General Brice Houdet, Vice Chief of Staff (middle) and Ingrid (with permission)



**Angela:** *How did this work take you into humanitarian psychology and what is the potential there for work and organizational psychologists?*

**Ingrid:** When I completed the NATO project, I was definitely inspired by humanitarian psychology, and I left the consultancy and set up as an independent practitioner. I was aware that the global challenges of human security cannot be addressed through single disciplinary approaches. I believe that sharing research and good practices, and fostering inter-disciplinary connections are essential to change. To do this you need to connect people, diverse ideas and multiple perspectives; with the purpose of strengthening the connective tissue of organizations and communities.

In order to connect this broader purpose to work and organizational psychology I and six other colleagues founded the *Centre for Psychology at Work*. We were inspired by a keynote presentation by Brian Nosek (2020) from the University of Virginia. Brian investigates the gap between values and practices, such as when behaviour is influenced by factors other than one's intentions and goals. His work is fundamental to creating cultures that celebrate diversity. The vision of the Centre is to use the power of psychology to ensure work plays a positive role in our lives, relationships and societies. Psychology has the potential to positively influence and contribute to local and global societal challenges. But, to achieve this, we believe psychology needs a *stronger voice*. By strengthening our community and identifying opportunities for collaboration and connection we can really make a difference. I see these as key roles both EAWOP and the BPS can play to develop an infrastructure that brings together different people, ideas and inspirations. Sometimes, all it takes to change the world is a group of people connected to a vision.

Many of these ideas are channelled in the growing area of *humanitarian work psychology* (HWP), defined by Alexander Glass and Lori Foster Thompson (2013, p. 353) as the 'synthesis of Industrial-Organizational psychology with deliberate and organised efforts to enhance human welfare'. I know people are inspired by the ideas of humanitarian psychology. For example, I have the pleasure of talking to students at many different universities, like Birkbeck College, London University in the UK and the American College of Greece. In these sessions I find that people are engaged in talking about humanitarian psychology more than any other area of study. These students are inspired by the positive contribution psychology can make towards sustainable livelihoods. I also feel this reflects a current, broader movement in society in terms of social responsibility; to understand collective needs, particularly of those marginalised by life circumstances.

**Angela:** *You may be interested to look at our last issue of InPractice (Volume 15, Issue 2) that focuses specifically on Young people, employment and careers. Also, in this issue (Volume 15, Issue 3) Belgin Okay-Somerville in her Research Spotlight feature writes about the importance of sustainable careers to peoples' well-being.*

**Ingrid:** While it is great to see these areas showing a broader focus of work and organizational psychology; the issue remains that there are no mapped-out paths for work and organizational psychologists to access work roles in humanitarian work psychology. For example, SIOP this year celebrates its 10-year anniversary of being granted non-governmental (NGO) special consultative status by the United Nations (UN). What was key to receiving this status, was SIOP members' ability to highlight the unique skills, expertise, research and practice they can bring to align with the UN's vision and mission to drive positive societal change. Therefore, we need to encourage similar infrastructures and partnerships to be developed in Europe. One of the ways we can influence the global challenges we face is to use the insights from work and organizational psychology to focus on aspects of human security.

**Angela:** *Tell me about project S.A.F.E. and your involvement*

**Ingrid:** Project S.A.F.E. (*Security Assessment for Everyone*) is an interdisciplinary network to advance the psychology of security and improve policy on human security in all its forms. Combining resources to create new responsive ways of capturing what is concerning people at any given time, in any given context, so that responsible governments and other agencies can act on evidence that is reliable, valid, accountable and ethically defensible.

This project encourages collaboration to create and promote research focusing on how human security is conceptualised and how it feels to be secure human beings. We can work together to advance change and evaluate policies that improve levels of security in a systematic way, micro to macro and macro to micro, bottom up and top down, ensuring multiple perspectives are included.

I am involved in this project working with Veronica Hopner, Darin Hodgetts and Stuart Carr from Massey University, Wellington, New Zealand and a team of internationally based academics. They are developing a position paper titled 'Human Security Psychology' (Hopner, Hodgetts & Carr, 2021) aiming to shift our understanding of psychology as a centralising force of the human elements of security, operating from the person, the group, and up to the national and global levels of security. By creating

an agreed and shared definition of *human security psychology*, we hope to integrate the different psychologies and various levels of focus, to provide a broader and integrated perspective of the diverse insecurities that people face, how these work in concert, and how psychology does and should respond. The UN and government bodies are important stakeholders in this project.

**Angela:** *What are the implications of project S.A.F.E for work and organizational psychology?*

**Ingrid:** Project S.A.F.E is aiming to build a big picture of global security that will enable psychologists specialising in various different areas to come together and work towards resolving different insecurities (e.g., poverty, unemployment, ill-health) faced in today's world.

Aspects of human security are clearly becoming more evident; and the Covid-19 pandemic has perfectly illustrated this. Health security (or health insecurities) are now discussed and described daily; in relation to access to vaccines, protective clothing or education. Further, economic security is about having a regular basic income that will cover the necessities of living and opportunities for leisure. But as senior business salaries continue to inflate greater inequities develop; making it harder for those less advantaged to meet their needs. My husband, Steve Covington, who works in international security and who has advised the senior NATO military for over 30 years, encapsulated the inter-relationship between inequality and insecurity by saying that we are “*only as secure as the hungriest child*”. There will be an opportunity to hear insights from Steve's role as international affairs adviser to NATO senior military when he delivers his *Current Issues* paper at the EAWOP Congress in January 2022.

Psychology is centrally placed to support the notion of ‘security for all’ encouraging people to look at the range of society from bottom to top; before decisions are made that favour only a few.

**Angela:** *How will we see the notions of humanitarian psychology and human security play out at the EAWOP Congress in Glasgow?*

**Ingrid:** The EAWOP congress in Glasgow offers many opportunities to explore humanitarian psychology and human security. There are several papers that talk to these topics at the congress – and here are a few examples:

- Ans de Vos from Belgium, one of the keynote speakers, will be looking at the *sustainability* of careers in disruptive times. In particular, Ans will be exploring how as employers, policy makers and societies, we can create a context in which all workers are motivated, capable and supported to take ownership over their career in order to preserve their employability, (mental) health and satisfaction over time;
- Stuart Carr's keynote address during the Congress Opening Ceremony (Tuesday 11 January, 18.00 -18.30, Clyde Theatre), '*Dodo or phoenix? Let's change together*' will be setting the stage to explore global issues in strategic and reactive ways with work psychology centrally involved in the issues of the future;
- Ros Searle's EAWOP Incubator Series symposium held at 13.00 -15 00 on Wednesday 12 January in Lomond, '*On living wages and decent work*' will be highlighting how concepts of work and organizational psychology are central to 'good work';
- Insecurity in work and the impact of precarious employment on poverty will be explored by Stuart Carr and colleagues in an *International Humanitarian Panel: The case for well-being at work* (Carter, Carr, Bonsal, Fotinatos-Ventouratos & Montaiuti, 2022) sponsored by the DOP at 16.30 - 17.25 on Thursday 13 January, in Dochart 2.

But what is hugely important is that these presentations encourage relationship building that will encourage psychology to have an impact on policy. For example, Stuart Carr and Ans de Vos are each actively involved in advising and guiding government policies in their resident countries. There is so much we can learn from these experiences to consolidate and strengthen the impact our profession can make. Ultimately, we need to develop roles that can offer evidenced-based input into global priorities; perhaps by creating the role of an UN-EAWOP representative or forming an NGO Special Council to the UN in a way similar to SIOP?

**Angela:** *Any final thoughts about where work and organizational psychology could go and why?*

**Ingrid:** What I would really like to see is a shift where work and organizational psychology is involved in policy making; and concepts of psychology are used by policy makers. Without this, policy making is blind to the needs of humanity.

Recently listening to lyrics from songs like John Lennon's *Imagine* (Lennon, 1971) we seem to have been side-tracked from the more collective considerations of these times. Individualism, neo-liberal ideals and self-preservation seems to have narrowed our focus

away from a collective understanding. I am sensing there is now a pendulum shift taking us back to considering security, well-being and sustainable livelihoods for all.

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# Family businesses: Where roles, values and work–family relationships form a single picture

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## About the author

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## Abstract

This paper aims to contribute a Central–Eastern European perspective, more specifically, a Slovak one, to the qualitative psychological studies on family businesses (FBs). In this paper I present three case studies of small family firms in Eastern Slovakia focusing on three theory–driven psychological aspects of family businesses: roles, relationships, and values. Additionally, the paper analyses the strategies and actions undertaken by FBs during the Covid–19 lockdown. The respondents were six first generation FB founders and owners (who are also spouses). The author believes that the FB founders' stories will contribute to a deeper understanding of how FB owners' interactions and dynamics are mirrored in their roles, values, and relationships; in particular, multiple roles, the values of family and unity, and positive relationships. Moreover, the paper deepens our understanding of how FBs have been affected by the Covid–19 lockdowns, and how they responded to the initial phase of the unprecedented situation.

*Keywords:* family business, roles, values, relationships, Covid–19

## Introduction

Family businesses (FBs) are an important and the most numerous business category worldwide. However, they have still not received the attention they deserve (Memili, Chang, Kellermanns & Welsh, 2015) and are frequently overlooked by researchers. In Slovakia's case there has been little research on FBs (Moresová, Sedliačiková & Kaščáková, 2020) despite the fact they create significant value, for example, by creating jobs in areas typified by job scarcity and creating wealth in country regions by deterring people from leaving the area to seek work opportunities elsewhere. These factors apply to Eastern Slovakia as well.

Few psychological studies have investigated FBs in the Central–Eastern Europe region. Hence, the aim of the paper is to contribute to qualitative psychological studies on FBs

in Slovakia. The recent history of FBs in Slovakia is relatively short as their existence was permitted only after the Velvet Revolution in 1989 (Krošláková, 2014; Strážovská, Strážovská & Sirotková, 2019). Hence, the “oldest” FBs in Slovakia are now about 30 years old. It is important to note that FBs are not specifically defined in the Slovak legislation (Slovak Business Agency, SBA, 2020). This complicates efforts to determine the share of FBs as a percentage of all small and medium enterprises in Slovakia. A rough estimate ranges somewhere from 60 to 80 per cent (SBA, 2018).

This paper yields three case studies of three small family firms operating in Eastern Slovakia, interviewed in January 2020 before the Covid-19 pandemic. The case studies focus on three theory-driven psychological aspects of family businesses: roles, relationships, and values. The research and theory on FBs indicate that these three aspects take on a unique form within FBs as they extend across both the business and family environments (Amarapurkar & Danes, 2005). I therefore begin the next part of the paper with a discussion on the theory relating to these three aspects of FBs: roles, values, and relationships. The three FB case studies are then presented with the aim of obtaining a complex picture of each FB, its unique story and the roles of its actors, values, and relationships. The unprecedented consequences of the global pandemic were also monitored. More specifically, the families were re-approached in the middle of the first Covid-19 country lockdown in April 2020 in an effort to investigate the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on the family firms and actions taken. Finally, the findings of the paper are discussed along with their limitations, strengths, and practical implications.

## Theoretical framework

### Roles in FBs

As stated earlier, the dual nature of family businesses (rooted in the interconnectedness of work and family) means there are multiple roles family members can play in a FB. Each role, such as that of wife or business partner, comes with different expectations and responsibilities. These may be grounded in the person’s educational/professional background, family values and relationships and shaped by the cultural context and traditions (Danes & Morgan, 2004; Kidwell, Kellermanns & Eddleston, 2012). Often family members occupy several specific roles that are not (always) compatible and that can cause role-oriented conflicts and work–family tensions (Danes & Morgan, 2004). Moreover, in FBs owned by couples, the family roles are interconnected with managerial

positions and leadership. Research by Philbrick and Fitzgerald (2007) shows that women in FBs successfully handle the challenges of multiple–role responsibilities. This is in line with Hakim’s Preference Theory that holds that women are more “adaptive” than men (Hakim, 2000) and prefer to combine work and family life. Moreover, if the woman’s involvement in the FB is boosted by spousal support and a satisfactory work–family balance, it facilitates family functioning (Philbrick & Fitzgerald, 2007).

The effective and successful management of the multiple roles’ hinges on the clarity of role expectations (Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoek & Rosenthal, 1964). Additionally, if the roles of family members in FBs are clearly set out, the level of role ambiguity reduces (Kidwell et al., 2012) and family integrity increases (Danes & Lee, 2004).

### **Values in family businesses**

Central to family roles is the shared meaning that includes a family’s norms, beliefs, and values (Haberman & Danes, 2007). Founders and owners of FBs have unique opportunities to shape the structure, attitudes, norms, and values that prevail in the organization (Schein, 1983). As Vallejo’s (2009) research showed, shared values within a FB reflect the values of the family owners and influence trust levels, goals, and other elements of organizational behaviour.

The values shared by couples owning an FB shape the company culture and are disseminated among other family members and FB employees. Moreover, the founders not only set the values that guide their enterprise but have sufficient time on the job to ensure that their beliefs and preferences are incorporated into the culture and actions of their firms (Gagné, Sharma & De Massis, 2014).

Several studies have reported the effect of family values on the business and have shown that these are connected with business continuity (e.g., Miller & Le Breton–Miller, 2006; Tapies & Ward, 2008). According to Sundaramurthy (2008), trust is one of the fundamental values in FBs. In a similar vein, trust and loyalty are values that often distinguish FBs from other businesses (Eddleston, Chrisman, Steier & Chua, 2010; Eddleston & Morgan, 2014; Sundaramurthy, 2008).

### **Relationships in family businesses**

Relationships play a crucial role in FBs and differ from those in non–FBs. Family business relationships are more complex, largely because of the overlap between the

family and the business environment. Previous research has suggested that the larger the firm, the greater the complexity of the relationships positively affecting family firm resilience (Bryant & Zick, 2005). Small FBs tend to have fewer resources and limited access to credit, compared with medium or large enterprises (Dahlhamer & Tierney 1998). Relationships and networks are the cornerstone of familiness (family firm specific influences) as a process resource (Irava & Moores, 2010; Zellweger, Eddleston & Kellermanns, 2010). Habbershon and Williams (1999) identify familiness as the unique set of resources created through interaction between the family and the business.

There is a general awareness that the relationships in an FB are fragile but also powerful and so should be protected and maintained; otherwise, cooperation or even the whole business will inevitably collapse. Moreover, Cole (2000) argues that the relationships in a FB are dual owing to the spill over between the work and family context; hence the two people have to manage two relationships simultaneously. In anticipation of, or in reaction to, difficulties that surface within the FB, the owners may attempt to build a culture of trust, cohesive relationships, and involvement-oriented environments, all of which contribute to behaviours that benefit the family firm (Eddleston & Kellermanns 2007; Miller et al., 2008).

Therefore, the questions I seek to answer in this paper are: a) *What roles do owners identify in small FBs?* b) *What values do owners emphasise in small FBs?* and c) *What relationships do owners identify in small FBs?* Given the global Covid-19 pandemic, our aim is to explore the consequences of the pandemic and the actions FBs have undertaken in this unprecedented situation.

## Method

In this study a qualitative approach was employed to obtain a detailed investigation of work–family roles, values, and relationships. Data were gathered in two waves with family businesses in Eastern Slovakia. The data were treated as confidential; the transcriptions were anonymised and the recordings were deleted once they had been transcribed.

The selection criteria were small firm (of up to 20 employees), with variability across business sectors and spousal joint ownership. The FBs were contacted by email about their willingness to be interviewed. Personal contacts were used first and then the snowball method to disseminate our request for participation.

Thirty FBs were contacted by email and invited to take part in the research. In the first wave, 10 FBs agreed to participate and were interviewed in January 2020. These firms were re–approached in the second wave in April 2020 during the country–wide Covid–19 lockdown. This time, most probably owing to the overall pessimistic and exhausting situation regarding the lockdown, only three out of the original ten FBs agreed to participate. Consequently, the data from these three FBs alone were used for the purposes of this paper. Based on my overall knowledge and experience of interviewing the 10 FBs, I cannot see any significant differences between these three and the other FBs. However, I would emphasise that, in the three participating FBs both owners (husband and wife) were equally involved and engaged in the FB.

In the first wave of the study, I aimed to answer these questions: *What roles do owners identify in small FBs? What values do owners emphasise in small FBs? What relationships do owners identify in small FBs?* In the second wave, my aim was to discover what strategies the FBs had introduced during the Covid–19 lockdown.

### **Interview design, data collection and analyses**

Altogether six face–to–face interviews were held with the owners of each company (husband and wife). The typical length of interview was, on average, 40 minutes. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. The interviews were structured into four segments with the help of these questions: a) *“Could you please briefly describe the type of business you run and the story behind it?”* b) *“What roles do you each have within the family business and what are your family duties?”* c) *“What are the values that underpin your family business climate and are there any that are common to both the family and the business?”* and d) *“What sorts of relationship have you formed and do you maintain in your family business?”*

Furthermore, all three FBs were re–approached (online) during the Covid–19 lockdown and the owners were asked about their experiences and the consequences of the pandemic for them. They filled in an online questionnaire consisting of three open–ended questions: a) *“How is your family business coping with the Covid–19 situation?”* b) *“What consequences has the Covid–19 lockdown had on your family business?”* and c) *“What actions/strategies have you/your family business undertaken?”* Respondents were encouraged to talk about and write down all situations they thought relevant to their Covid–19 experience, not just recent ones. This questionnaire was completed by the FB as “the respondent”, rather than by the individual spouses as was the case with the interviews. However, sometimes it was possible to distinguish the respondent’s gender based on the

grammatical inflections used, and where this was the case, the gender was added to the respondent’s quote.

The data were analysed in three steps. Firstly, a content analysis of the interview transcripts was performed, in which the characteristic features of the family business were highlighted based on the three theory–driven aspects (roles, relationships and values). The responses from the FB owner–couple were either identical/similar, that is, they saturated the same category, or differed, mainly due to the different roles assigned, that is, they expanded the category or indicated a new one. In this way, the “disagreements” in the interview content were representative of a “different viewpoint”, and as such were a valuable contribution to the overall picture of the family business. The findings were then organised into three case studies. Secondly, an attempt was made to visualise the FBs via the content of the interviews. The content of two interviews per FB was squeezed into a single word cloud (using atlas.ti) to show the most frequent words used in the interviews. Finally, the online data exploring the Covid–19 impact covering actions, strategies and consequences for FBs was processed and content analyses were performed.

## Participants

Three first–generation family businesses in three sectors (information and communication technology, ICT, manufacturing, and tourism) participated in the study. All three were founded after the 1989 Velvet Revolution in what was then Czechoslovakia and have been operating in the market for between 13 and 30 years. They are all small companies with up to 20 employees and based in Eastern Slovakia (see Table 1).

Table 1  
Overview of the three family businesses

Family Business	C1	C2	C3
<b>Established</b>	1990	2005	2007
<b>Sector</b>	ICT	Manufacturing	Tourism
<b>Ownership</b>	Husband & wife	Husband & wife	Husband & wife
<b>Setting</b>	Urban	Rural	Rural
<b>Number of employees</b>	6	3	5-15
<b>Children involved</b>	No	No	Yes
<b>Other sources of income</b>	No	No	Yes

The interviews were conducted with six participants separately (three males and three females, aged between 47 and 53 years). All six are the owners of the respective FB along with their spouses (three couples). The online Covid–19 lockdown questionnaire was completed as a “collective” response from the family business. All respondents participated in their free time and on a voluntary basis.

The interviews and questionnaires were conducted in Slovak, as were the analyses. Once the study had been completed, the results of the content analyses and selected quotes were translated into English by a professional translator. These data enabled a case study to be created for each of the three FBs. The findings are presented below to provide a deeper understanding of the FB processes and dynamics.

## Results

In line with the aims of this paper, I briefly introduce the FB case studies and present what the content analysis of the interview transcripts revealed about the FBs. To keep the FB stories compact, the content is organised into four sections: a) Description; b) Word cloud; c) Roles, values, and relationships; and d) Covid–19 consequences and actions. Quotes from men are marked (M) and quotes from women (F).

### Case study of family business C1

#### Description

This FB was founded in 1990 as a family firm by a couple, both having recently graduated from university. The husband was a programmer and thought the freedom to engage in entrepreneurship after the Velvet Revolution in November 1989 in Czechoslovakia offered opportunities. The decision to start a family business was spontaneous:

*“Everything happened so that it somehow pulled us or as it were led us somewhere without us planning or thinking about it, will it have advantages, disadvantages, do we want it, do we not want it? And so we somehow went into it throwing caution aside, head on. So basically, I wouldn't say it was a decision. This is how it turned out, it started itself.” (M)*

In addition, both owners stressed that they were lucky:

*“At that time, really, we were also lucky with people, in short, we met people of the kind of character that it just came into being, I would say it absolutely created the environment.” (M)*

Further, they noted they were learning on the job because they were never taught how to run a business at school or university:

*“Because our whole lives we had studied something different to what we started doing when we finished our studies. So basically, the technology, we knew a little bit about it, but there was no such thing as running a company, running a project, organising a business or anything like that at the time, no one knew anything, it didn’t exist.” (M)*

They began developing software solutions. The woman was an accountant and so did the finances and the administration, while the man was a programmer and so was responsible for product development.

*“...we founded the company together – with my husband – 30 years ago, and we purposely went into software development.” (F)*

At the time of the interview C1 had an additional six employees alongside the two owners. Their offices are in the family home (in a small town). Working from home is an everyday routine for this FB. There are three children in the family (aged 8, 14 and 19 years) but there is no prospect of them taking over the FB now. As parents, the FB owners noted:

*“They [the children] have their own interests that are incompatible with the FB activities so far.” (M)*

*“The children are going their own way and I have no idea who I will give the company to.” (M)*

*“...sometimes I do have the feeling that the fact they [the children] were exposed to all the situations and experiences of FB, that we [the parents and FB owners] have discouraged them from following us.” (F)*

## Word cloud

To gain deeper insight into C1, a word cloud of the most frequent words in the interview transcripts was created, shown in Figure 1. The C1 discourse created by the owner couple was specific in that *work* (both noun and verb) was the most frequently mentioned word, followed by *firm* and *family*. Several verbs describing action, communication (*tell/talk*; *think*) and discipline (*must*) were used during the interview, which fits with the overall impression that both the firm and household are highly active.

Figure 1  
C1 word cloud



### Roles, values, and relationships

In C1 the division of owners’ roles is quite structured (see Table 2) and seven role categories were identified. The *founder* role was described with nostalgia and emotion after over 30 years of running the FB. The male founder’s role here was also complementary with the role determined by his *education* as “a programmer” which led him to establish an FB in the information technology sphere. Some of the value categories identified and displayed in the word cloud confirm that values were mentioned within the FB owners’ discourse. Hence, I could assume that the C1 owners are in fact living life according to the values of *family*, *openness in communication* and *cohesion* both as a family and a firm. The relationships mentioned by the C1 owners fall into five distinct categories. They all concern positive forms of relationships, emphasising *partnership*, *mutual support* and *enrichment*, and referring to both domains: work (FB) and family.

Table 2  
Results of content analysis of roles, values, and relationships in C1

Company C1	Category	Quotes
Roles	Multiple roles	<i>I am the director of the company, the main owner of the company, the main head of development and I am basically mostly responsible for the running of the company (M)</i>
	Roles by education	<i>I'm basically a programmer (M) I have a degree in finance and management. So, the paperwork stuff was closer to me, I haven't studied computers or programming at all (F)</i>
	Combined work–family role	<i>We spouses are the main owners (M)</i>
	Managerial role	<i>I do more of the technical, management side (M) She does the administration, management, running the company in terms of the administration, public offices (M)</i>
	Complementary roles	<i>...and we complement each other (M)</i>

	<b>Founder(s)</b>	<i>He had his vision, and he actually realised that vision...(F) ...since its [C1] creation, I've been a part of it, I came up with the name of the company, and the softer things in general (F) ...because we are part of the company, so for sure it's like you are nurturing, or praising your child, so I think so, yeah for sure...(F)</i>
	<b>Gender roles</b>	<i>I, as a woman, am already in that role, at that time actually the paperwork was my role...(F)</i>
<b>Values</b>	<b>Fair cooperation (responsibility)</b>	<i>The company is built on responsibility for itself, how can I put it, in our company there are basically flexible working hours, days off, it is built more on long-term fair cooperation or coexistence (M) the huge freedom to actually decide for ourselves, that we are responsible for ourselves (F)</i>
	<b>Trust</b>	<i>...even trust, it is also based on trust (M) ...trust is important, it is absolutely key so that a person can feel secure, or I would say, so that they can feel relaxed, or what do you call it, or ... I just think it's impossible without trust (F)</i>
	<b>Unity (we)</b>	<i>to recognise that everyone matters and on the other hand I know that everyone has their abilities so then (M) And to ensure that unity, we are in the same boat (F)</i>
	<b>Cohesion</b>	<i>cohesion is needed, it is clearly needed, it is impossible to work without it (M)</i>
	<b>Family values</b>	<i>I think it's just the respect and trust that we have among us as an organisational culture.... it all works just like in our family (F)</i>
	<b>Openness in communication</b>	<i>Communicate, communicate, communicate, all the time, because sometimes we can come up with something better, if it comes unstuck in communication, and misunderstood, then we're not pulling on one rope and then it doesn't function, it doesn't work (F)</i>
<b>Relationships</b>	<b>Partnership</b>	<i>And whatever decision XX [the husband] wants to make, he always comes to me and we consult on it together. And the two views are then compared (F)</i>
	<b>Support (beyond the limits of work)</b>	<i>we are basically in the same boat (F) even the social feeling in the company, when something happened to someone, we supported them and understood them not only in terms of work (M) our colleague who has been battling a disease for five years, in fact, is not able to work to the same extent as he did before, he's had a partial disability pension for three years, but the company unanimously agreed that there would be no pay cut, because it could have happened to any of us (F)</i>
	<b>Keeping relationships natural</b>	<i>... what comes naturally to us, we try to do that in the company as well, in terms of communication, cooperation, relations with people, whether employees or business partners (M)</i>
	<b>Richer through relationships</b>	<i>well... I think we become richer (F) I know him through the work side as well, so it probably influences that satisfaction (F)</i>
	<b>Bonds</b>	<i>but actually what we already have together has created very strong bonds. Even outside our married life (F)</i>

## Covid-19 consequences and actions

Interestingly, in the three-week national lockdown the C1 owners reported no significant changes at work:

*"We still do normal work at home, so from the work point of view, there is no difference."*

But there the everyday family routine did change because during the lockdown all the schools were closed and pupils studied online from home:

*"The difference is in the family. My little daughter is at home and I study with her at home, so there is less time to work." (M)*

The fact that there was apparently less time for work turned out not to be an issue because the change in the work pace was perceived positively by the FB owners:

*"...from many points of view, more rest."*

Time spent completing the questionnaire was also useful, providing an opportunity for the FBs to reflect and gain insights:

*"Finally, someone made us sit down and look at the business from a different psychological perspective." (M)*

Both FB owners said they were worried about the future, noting that there was no back-up plan for the worst-case scenario (FB termination):

*"...because we are both in the same company, that means that if they fail, they both fail, when we're doing well, we're both doing well...but when the business fails... That's the disadvantage of both being in the same boat."*

## Case study of family business C2

### Description

C2 is a FB that has been manufacturing furniture since 2005. The husband is a professional carpenter who started his own business in 2000. With the growing amount of work, his wife joined the business in 2005, taking on the administration and invoicing roles (she studied at a business college).

*"I took care of his invoices. It was just getting so much that it couldn't be managed anymore, so I decided, he convinced me to leave the job that I had and I started working with him. And we have been together since then." (F)*

*"I am a trained carpenter and I still enjoy the job. I had to involve my wife, because I was no longer able to handle all the tasks myself. And women have a different view of certain things to men." (M)*

At the beginning, it did not go smoothly. They worked hard but had modest expectations:

*"Those were years of hard work. We did the first 10–15 years working until the evening, we worked weekends at a stretch... You could say we had the weekend off. We just made a commitment that we wouldn't work on the weekends." (F)*

To succeed means to follow the latest trends and keep learning:

*“But I go to the training with my husband – regularly. We need to know the latest trends, new things. We meet new people.” (F)*

*“I am most pleased with the customer satisfaction. We use the latest trends, we try to apply them as much as possible in practice.” (M)*

C2 has three more employees besides the two owners. Their office and workroom are situated in the small town the family lives in. They have two children (aged 16 and 18 years), with no prospect of the FB being handed down to them. The main reason being the carpentry and that neither the son nor the daughter have inherited this skill from the father. But the FB owners remain optimistic, humorously stating:

*“For the next carpenter in the family we’ll have to wait for the grandchildren.” (F)*

### Word cloud

To provide deeper insight into C2 I present in Figure 2 the words that occurred most frequently in the interview transcript. In the interview with the couple owning C2 the word *family* dominated, followed by *work* and *enterprising*.

Figure 2  
C2 word cloud



### Roles, Values and Relationships

Out of the three FB interviews, this transcript was the shortest one. The interview with the manufacturing sector couple mirrored their everyday habit of working hard and not speaking much. Despite *family* being at the centre of C2’s general discourse, the role categories identified were all work–related. This could stem from the C2 strategy of separating work and family life. However, in the value categories the family was presented as the most important value (see Table 3). The C2 owners were also parents

who wanted to disseminate the essential values of work to the family and vice versa. In the process of ascertaining the nature of the relationships, five positive relationship categories were identified in C2, which were both family and business oriented. The value of (product) *quality* was interconnected with maintaining positive long-term relationships with customers. Besides the relationships associated with the family and work, the spousal ties were described as strengthening and entailing a growing mutual *admiration*.

Table 3  
Results of content analysis of roles, values, and relationships in company C2

Company C2	Category	Quotes
<b>Roles</b>	<b>Multiple roles</b>	<i>I am in charge of the orders, customers, orders from suppliers, all the business relations, accounting...basically all the things that have to be dealt with before it [the furniture] is made.</i>
	<b>Work based description</b>	<i>I'm a kind of workaholic too (F)</i>
	<b>Roles by education</b>	<i>I am here because of the production, the quality of the products... I am a trained furniture maker (M)</i>
	<b>Complementary of roles</b>	<i>I had to involve my wife because I was no longer able to handle all the tasks myself (M)</i>
	<b>Gender roles</b>	<i>[I had to involve my wife]...And women have a different view of certain things to men (M)</i>
<b>Values</b>	<b>Quality</b>	<i>do everything 100 percent... make things and decisions so that we needn't be ashamed of our name (M)</i>
	<b>Trust</b>	<i>We rely on each other doing their job as they should. So basically trust is still important. In everything (F)</i>
	<b>Team cohesion</b>	<i>We help each other (M)</i>
	<b>Family</b>	<i>For us, the family is most important, it comes first (F)</i>
	<b>Blended values (business and family)</b>	<i>we try to teach the children a sense of responsibility, but we've always been like that... That's how it all blends in - the family with the company, so the way we are at home, we're the same in the company (F)</i>
	<b>Honesty</b>	<i>Don't lie (M)</i>
<b>Relationships</b>	<b>Family-like relationships</b>	<i>the family is also in the company. That's why we never wanted a big company. Never. Because then the family would be lost (F)</i>
	<b>Long-term business relations</b>	<i>customer relations. We have an awful lot. Long-term customers, we made something for grandma, made something for the children and now we're making something for the grandchildren. That's such a good feeling (F)</i> <i>...When you have good relations with suppliers. It's always better. For example, a while ago there was a customer we assembled a wardrobe for, my husband didn't have the right change, so he left it at that and then he brought back the rest of the money (F)</i>
	<b>Positive relationships</b>	<i>It's always better when you know you don't have to hide from those people. When you know those people are happy to see you, then it's fine (F)</i>
	<b>Partnerships</b>	<i>We are more together we are forced to decide things together. We respect each other's opinions more, we don't argue about the little things (M)</i>
	<b>Admiration</b>	<i>I value my wife more and more (M)</i>

## **Covid-19 consequences and actions**

In C2 the country lockdown stopped business completely:

*"We have not placed a single order since the state of emergency was declared."*

Despite the difficult situation the owners tried to avoid dismissals by claiming government support:

*"...we don't want to resolve the situation by laying off employees."*

The main reason was that they value their employees' work and it was important for the business to keep them on. On the positive side they reported innovations with all family members participating:

*"It moved us forward, we want to expand the range of services for our customers. We have offered customers the possibility of electronic communication and we are working to improve the business in the future."*

However, in general they did not perceive the Covid-19 lockdown as having a positive effect on C2:

*"There is not much you can say about the benefits. Rather, it's a test of unity."*

*"[there is] no income for the company and therefore none for the family. On the contrary, spending has increased."*

They reported many issues and disadvantages:

*"The biggest disadvantage is that the whole family is dependent on the income from the business. So the whole family suffers from the lack of income."*

Summing up the situation in C2, they were worried about the future and the lockdown consequences:

*"Closing businesses can have a much worse and longer-term impact on families than the virus itself."*

## **Case study of family business C3**

### **Description**

The final business C3 entered the hospitality/tourism sector in 2007. Their focus is on catering and accommodation, and, in the last few years, organic farming. The owners

(a husband and wife, both with secondary vocational education) have been working for the company from the beginning.

*“The family business also has its charm. My wife and I travelled a lot and we experienced some of the business sectors abroad, and then we decided that yes, we would go for it, because we saw that we were both the type to be able to manage it.” (M)*

*“... we had a very big house and we created a guest house. That’s how it started. And somehow it gradually developed.” (F)*

The husband (besides owning the FB) also works for a big regional production factory as an employee and so most of the day-to-day running of the FB is overseen by the wife.

*“She [the wife] is the “responsible one”. And of course, the fact is that she is here in the business and she cares about it, because she already feels like it’s hers, because she’s the owner, she decides.” (M)*

*“The family business was a dream that came true...I would say so, a dream come true. Definitely a dream come true. I used to dream it.” (M)*

The only son (18) helps out with the business. He enjoys it and the father (parents) sees him as the future of the company:

*“He learned quickly, he behaves well, he is intelligent, he also got a good education at school... So, he’s fine for a few years and in my opinion, he will be a full member of the business, he can take over as the manager. I’m not telling him yet so that the fame doesn’t go to his head, but I think, with the fact that even in the family it was always set up and talked about, it motivated him so much that he is also learning and getting educated here in the business.” (M)*

*“And he actually suggested that he could help us with this or that. And he chose that school himself, which also directs him to the family business. We never forced him to continue. He can decide his direction at any time, but I see that he is enjoying it at the moment.” (F)*

The additional value of their family business is creating a job opportunity for the son:

*“...so, our son hasn’t gone abroad, so he’s at home and enjoys it, as it’s a benefit that we saved at least one who didn’t go abroad.” (F)*

The FB has up to 15 employees (depending on the season) besides the two owners. The premises that the family live in are part of the FB guest house and restaurant complex

which is in a small village in the countryside. The owners' only son (aged 18 years) helps with all the work and seems likely to be the FB successor.

### Word cloud

To obtain deeper insight into C3 I present the words that occurred most frequently in the interview transcript in Figure 3. In the discourse on the owners, similarly to those of C2, put *family* above everything, followed by *enterprising*. This reflects the fact that, as they stated in the interviews, the FB owner couple see family (-like) relationships as an essential part of the company culture.

Figure 3  
C3 word cloud



### Roles, Values and Relationships

The division of owners' roles in C3 was sorted into three categories. There are fewer role categories because many of the roles the owners took on came under the category *multiple roles* and the universal category of *role awareness* (see Table 4). Some of the value categories identified are displayed in the word cloud, such as *family*, *trust*, and *well-being*. The only value identified in C3 relating to the company's rural environment (agrotourism) was *tradition* and preserving customs for future generations. The relationships mentioned by the C3 owners came under four categories. They all concerned *positive relationships* and emphasised the family and *family bonds*.

Table 4  
Results of content analysis of roles, values, and relationships in company C3

Company C3	Category	Quotes
Roles	<b>Multiple roles</b>	<i>The main thing (my role) is pricing and company strategy (M) ... he takes care of the kitchen, the purchasing of the ingredients, pricing (F) Well, I take care of the guests. And the interior design of our premises. (F)</i>
	<b>Roles by education</b>	<i>I'm a trained grocer in a specific field, yeah, ...(M)</i>
	<b>Roles awareness</b>	<i>Everyone just needs to be aware of their role in company.(M)</i>
Values	<b>Fair cooperation</b>	<i>So the trust in being helpful to one another (F)</i>
	<b>Tradition</b>	<i>that it is a family company, based on tradition. What we can offer here in the countryside, because we are in the countryside, far from the capital, so we can only offer tradition (M)</i>
	<b>Trust</b>	<i>...without trust no one can work these days. No one can even exist without trust (M) In fact, the family business – plus or minus – works everywhere on the same basis of trust (M)</i>
	<b>Quality</b>	<i>That the quality, the precision, when it is maintained and it is constantly improving, it is profitable in the long run (M) honest work (M)</i>
	<b>Well-being</b>	<i>It is important that everyone feels happy there. As is the case with us as it comes first, that the staff are fine (F)</i>
	<b>Family</b>	<i>the person (me) has already grown up with the values that you must have your family around you, is the biggest value for me now. That I'm together with my family (M) That family stability. Everything with that has to do with the family, so. Those family values remain (F)</i>
Relationships	<b>Friendship</b>	<i>with us it is friendlier, deeper relationships (F)</i>
	<b>Positive relationships</b>	<i>It is very important for us to have such a harmonious atmosphere around us (M) Because that's the only way we can provide our guests with those services as well, the valuable services of how to deliver with love, as love comes first (F)</i>
	<b>Family like relationships</b>	<i>But I have, so far I would say, to a greater extent, employees, that for what they are here in this team for, I can rely on them (M)</i>
	<b>Bonds</b>	<i>that the family is so much more united since we do business on a larger scale. As long as we were small, there is only the close family, but now it is bigger (F)</i>

## Covid-19 consequences and actions

In their responses the owners of C3 reported that the FB had done no business during the lockdown period:

*“a complete shutdown here.”*

They enjoyed their family time together:

*“Rest, shared conversations...also on the topic of the family business...”*

and making plans together:

*“such as later this year, what new things we can offer, time to re-evaluate our services, respond to demand.”*

They also revealed some financial issues and uncertainties:

*“no income from the business, the expenses remain, we have to pay...”*

*“We cannot estimate when the tourism sector will start. Will people still travel in 2020?”*

The C3 owners, for now, are staying optimistic and express hope for the future:

*“perhaps domestic tourism /holidays in Slovakia/ will be will be more popular with Slovak citizens than travelling abroad in the second half of 2020, but also in the coming years.”*

## Summary of results

Before proceeding to the discussion, I would like to end this part of the paper with a short summary of the similarities across the three case studies. All three FBs are under spousal ownership and are run based on vital spousal cooperation, drawing on their individual strengths and complementarity of skills, knowledge, and experience. Several other similarities were identified in the three case studies. The first concerns their roles: two role categories that were identified in all three FBs were *multiple roles* and *roles (determined) by education*. There was also some spill over between the multiple roles that could be seen in the everyday routines, in contrast to the negative (conflictual) form of work–family spill overs. All three FBs are small enterprises with a significant family impact, which means that, beside the overall focus on business activities, the values of *family* and *unity* remain crucial. Furthermore, *positive relationships* both inside and outside the family were reported as a (pre)condition of a successful FB.

Another similarity relates to *succession planning*. This was (is) a neglected aspect in family businesses in Slovakia in general (SBA, 2019), and it stems from the lack of strategic planning by FBs, even though succession failure could have a severe impact on many FBs.

Regarding the findings from the online questionnaire about the Covid–19 consequences, *dual ownership* and *being reliant on a single–family enterprise* as the family’s only source of income stood out as being a risky combination in unexpected situations.

## Discussion

The study aimed to contribute to the psychological studies on FBs by creating and presenting three case studies of small family enterprises. Another contribution of the

study is that it explored three important psychological aspects of FBs at the same time: role, values, and relationships. Hence the case studies give a more complex picture of family business dynamics.

The study and analyses of the interviews and questionnaire content revealed information on roles, values, and relationships. More specifically, the broadest role category identified in the FBs was *multiple roles*. This is not surprising given that the multiple roles category refers to the number of roles held by FB owners, who are also parents, spouses, managers and so on. Where there were multiple roles the businesses reported *no conflict*, in contrast with some previous research findings (Dyer, 1994). It could be assumed that this was due to the natural spill over between work and family in the family businesses. The emphasis in these FBs was on marital unity and spousal support within the business–owning couples. The FB discourse clearly showed how the business–owning couples were able to benefit from acknowledging the strengths and experience of the spouses. Moreover, there are research findings indicating that spousal support facilitates family functioning (Philbrick & Fitzgerald, 2007).

Content analyses provided further insight into FB values. *Family* and *Trust* were two values that all three FBs mentioned. This is in line with FB research confirming that FBs have a unique organizational culture based on the importance of ties and reliance on family members. The idea that perceptions of the family are a crucial value is confirmed in research by Habbershon (2006) showing that family influence is more extensive in smaller firms. There is also a consensus that familial trust, as well as familial and social relationships, are important facilitators of business (Pearson & Carr, 2011). Moreover, when trust is valued in FBs, it can reduce the need for the controls and formalisation that tend to occur in non–family businesses (Mellewigt, Madhok & Weibel, 2007; Weibel, 2007). Other values identified in two out of the three FBs were fair cooperation, team cohesion, quality (of work and products) and openness in communication, confirming the importance of trust–building group values.

Regarding the focus on the relationships, several categories of *harmonic* and *functioning* relationships were revealed, such as bonds, partnerships, and family–like relationships with non–family employees. Family business–owning couples generally described the relationships as evolving over time, being deeper and stable, and the result of all the business experience and time spent together. The presence of positive, caring family relationships should have positive outcomes for FBs. As previous studies have shown, positive relationships enhance firm performance (Eddleston & Kellermanns, 2007) and

strong bonds encourage family members to act in the best interests of the firm (Kidwell et al., 2012).

### Running a FB in times of crisis

The responses from the three FBs on *Covid-19 consequences and actions* revealed some considerations that were put into practice. There were several similarities between these and “Ten considerations for effectively managing the Covid-19 transition” (Habersaat et al., 2020). In all three FBs, the owners reported taking action to establish a “new normal” approach. They were caring as much as possible for their family members but not forgetting about their non-family employees and their stories. They also aimed at staying positive, sticking together, and supporting each other. Moreover, some sectoral differences were identified in the FB owners’ reports of the Covid-19 consequences. The FB operating in the ICT sector reported that the Covid-19 lockdown had had some effect, but the opposite was true for FBs in the manufacturing and tourism sectors. The unexpected nature of the pandemic revealed the most vulnerable aspect of FBs: the whole family depends on the income and prosperity of the FB. This finding is in line with a report by the SBA (2018). Some of the responses of the FB-owning couples indicated worries and insecurity. This shows the fragility of FBs in relation to the economic consequences and whole-family dependency on FB prosperity. Finding other incomes sources is becoming a less and less realistic proposition, given the recent increase in unemployment rates around the world. The Slovak unemployment rate jumped from 6.7 per cent (April 2020) to 7.4 per cent (June 2020), and was highest in Eastern Slovakia at 11.2 per cent (upsvr, June 2020).

Further, the case studies show that these particular FBs are in a complex situation at a time when their founders (the first generation of FBs) are reaching the point where the next generation should be entering the businesses.

### Limitations and strengths

The findings of this paper are based on analyses of three FBs in one region of a country; hence they are not more widely generalisable. Another source of potential bias is the emotive state of the participants when describing their FB, which could have led to positivity and optimism prevailing over negative recalls. In future, the data collection method could be improved by adopting a broader range of FB actors and combining the views of the FB owner with those of the family and non-family employees and/or customers.

The strengths of the study are also worth a mention. One strength is the attention paid to the FBs from a psychological point of view. As mentioned earlier in the results, the FB owners thought participating in the interviews had helped them gain insights into their FB from a different perspective. Another strength of the paper is that it gives a voice to FBs in Slovakia, who need to be heard and accepted by policy makers and the authorities as well as academics.

## Practical implications

There are several practical implications of our research that may prove useful to FB owners and/or FB managers and organizational practitioners:

- The present FB research has shown that *roles*, *values*, and *relationships* are important psychological aspects of small enterprises. From the perspective of work and organizational psychology practitioners and FB owners, it would be worth re-communicating these aspects after a certain period of time to ensure responsibilities, tasks and behaviours are clear and brought up to date within the firm/organization (e.g., one FB owner claimed the “roles were assigned”, but it is not clear whether the employees and other family members recognised this role assignment; the same applies to values and relationships);
- Businesses/families have no back-up plans for unexpected situations and, as the first Covid-19 lockdown in Slovakia revealed, all three FBs were mainly dependent on a single income source. The challenging and changing circumstances highlighted the fact that FBs need to be both alert and flexible in order to safeguard their incomes and business;
- As mentioned previously in the summary of the results, the issue of succession had not been addressed much by the FBs interviewed. The majority of FBs in Slovakia are now reaching the phase of (first) generational change – 30 years after the political changes that created opportunities for all forms of commercial enterprise. The insights gleaned about the FBs show that succession planning is neglected, and that lack of succession may have a severe impact on the sustainability of many FBs. These findings should help to focus attention on this issue.

## Conclusions

Family businesses in Slovakia find themselves in difficult circumstances. In general, on the national level there is insufficient support from the state authorities, and on the business level a key problem is the lack of successors. Moreover, this is all taking place amidst a global pandemic. The current paper focuses on three psychological aspects (roles, values, and relationships) that are important for the stability and continuity of FBs. It also highlights the FBs' immediate reactions in the initial phase of the unprecedented global pandemic.

On a personal level, I would like to pay tribute to all the families that have established FBs and who are following their dreams and working with passion and dedication for both the family and the region. I also hope that the stories of these family firms bring together the research (theory) and practice and form useful case studies of small FBs. I would be delighted if the case studies prove useful to practitioners, FB owners and managers, as they paint a relatively complex picture of FB dynamics, actions and behaviours and represent a source of information from which there is much to learn.

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# Action learning as a practice: A case study of compassion in action

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## Abstract

The need for compassion – broadly defined as noticing suffering, feeling empathetic concern, and taking action – is emerging as a crucial issue for 21st-century workplaces and organizations (Seppälä et al., 2017). This paper presents a case study of an action learning initiative that was designed to put compassion into action in a UK higher education organization. Action learning involves a small group working on real problems from practice, taking action, and learning as individuals, team/group and organization. This way of working has been part of the work and organizational psychology practitioner toolkit since its inception by Reg Revans in the 1940s (Pedler, 2021). This case study demonstrates Revans' (2011) practical approach to integrating action learning into every-day situations and enhancing the practical and professional skills of the workforce, which in this instance focuses upon compassion in action. The paper also illustrates the role of work and organizational psychologists as 'third

space' practitioners (Whitchurch, 2013) in the professional field of organizational development. It demonstrates how collaborative academic-practitioner relationships and learning enabled the practice of compassion in action through creation of shared stories of self-compassion (Nowlan, 2021). It also emphasises critical action learning to illustrate practical application and use of systems-psychodynamics thinking, and the unconscious processes that play out within and between groups and individuals at work (Obholzer & Roberts, 2019). The paper highlights the importance of reflective supervision in action learning, which in this case study used the innovative concept of social dreaming (Archer, 2021).

**Keywords:** action learning, compassion, academic-practitioner collaboration, unconscious processes, social dreaming

## Introduction

This case study of action learning as a practice focuses on the development of compassion in action in a higher education organization in the UK. Its aims are to: a) describe our experience as members of an action learning group using a framework for academic-practitioner research and practice; b) illustrate critical action learning and reflective supervision from a systems-psychodynamic thinking and social dreaming methodology; and c) present a novel academic-practitioner approach based on working in the 'third space/s' as areas where two or more professional/practice cultures intersect and draw on the qualities of each. The case study is an example of Revans' (2011) practical approach to integrating action learning into every-day situations and enhancing the practical and professional skills of the workforce. The paper adopts a 'practice-to-theory' approach, which: '*Starts by walking the terrain of compassion – then moves to studying the map – theory*' (Haroun, 2021, p. 113, original emphasis).

The paper is structured as follows. First, we introduce the neoliberal context of the case study, and the organizational/strategic context and institutional values in which is located. Next, there is an account of the process and practice of critical action learning, which includes stories of compassion and self-compassion. Then we discuss how theoretical lenses of compassion and psychodynamic thinking can provide insight into action learning as a practice. This incorporates the process of reflective supervision using the innovative concept of social dreaming. The paper concludes with our critical reflections on working in 'third space/s' as areas where two (or more) cultures intersect and draw on the qualities of each other. This includes consideration of what working in third space/s means for work and organizational psychology.

## The neoliberal context of the case study

This case study is about academic–practitioner action learning in a UK higher education organization at a time of considerable global disruption and dissatisfaction in the neoliberal ‘measured university’ (Caddell & Wilder, 2018, p. 14; Morales Vazquez & Levin, 2018; Smyth, 2017). Fleming (2020), a business school academic refers to the consequences of neoliberalism as ‘dark academia’ (p. 1305). Students have been re-cast as consumers who pay a high price for their education – sometimes in more ways than financially. Student and staff mental health is a global concern in universities (e.g., Auerbach et al., 2018; Hughes & Spanner, 2019; Morrish & Priaulx, 2020), and compassion is now seen as an antidote to damaging neoliberal policies, and a crucial element of higher education practice (Gibbs, 2017; Pedersen, 2021).

However, the harmful effects of neoliberalism are pernicious and widespread, affecting workplaces and experiences of work beyond higher education. For an example of the impact of neoliberalism on automotive trade unions and the shop floor in Poland, the UK, the USA and Canada see Stewart, Pulignano and Mrozowicki (2019). While Stewart et al. address the material changes to work and labour processes, they also recommend a social audit that involves a ‘health tracker ... indicating where people get injured, when they become stressed and how they become unwell’ (p. 29). Put more simply and starkly, ‘neoliberalism is bad for your mental health’ (Bell, 2019, p. 79), and concerns relating to mental health cut across all organizations. Lost productivity due to mental ill health in the World Health Organization (WHO) European Region accounts for costs equivalent to US\$ 140 billion per year (WHO, 2017). The coronavirus pandemic has resulted in a decline in mental well-being in the EU as measured using the WHO-5 mental well-being scale (Eurofound, 2021). In the UK, work-related stress, depression or anxiety – defined as a harmful reaction people have to undue pressures and demands placed on them at work – has increased. The total number of cases of work-related stress, depression or anxiety in 2019/20 was 828,000, a prevalence rate of 2,440 per 100,000 workers. This was statistically significantly higher than the previous period (Health and Safety Executive, HSE, 2020). Neoliberal ideology and global workplace mental health crisis have highlighted the need for compassionate practice at multiple levels – individual, group, team, organizational and societal.

## The need for compassion

The need for rigorous compassion science as an academic field is now one of equal significance for academics and practitioners in all contemporary organizations and

workplace settings (Seppälä et al., 2017). Psychological research shows a positive relationship between self-compassion and mental health. Individuals who learn to be present with their distress are better able to manage difficult emotions and have greater psychological health and well-being (Bluth & Neff, 2018; Inwood & Ferrari, 2019). A neoliberal market-based paradigm influences how every part of an organizational system is defined and valued. Therefore, this case study begins with a brief outline of the strategic context in which it was located, and definition of compassion as a core institutional value.

### **The strategic context of the case study**

The organizational context of this case study was one of organizational change. Through a process of consultation with staff, being compassionate was identified as a core strategic value, defined as follows:

We are thoughtful and sensitive, supportive, and encouraging, making time to talk, especially when the pressure is on. As a university community we are inclusive and united, careful to consider what enables each and every one of us to play our part (University of Westminster, 2018, p. 9).

Making time to talk involves dialogue, and this case study illustrates the strategic importance of listening to different stakeholder views, while also remaining alert to the possibility that the ‘compassion turn’ in 21st-century universities – and indeed other organizations – might simply become nothing more than a trendy ‘buzz word’. Or a ‘flavour of the month’ solution that ‘fails to address the underlying discontents and root causes of the need for compassion’ (Waddington, 2021a, p. 12). An emphasis on critical action learning and systems-psychodynamic thinking enabled exploration of underlying issues behind the need for compassion in this case study.

### **Critical action learning and systems-psychodynamic thinking**

Action learning characteristically involves a small group working on real problems or issues from practice, identifying options, taking action, and learning as individuals, as a team or group, and as an organization (Revans, 2011). Action learning can be both powerful and frightening; it necessitates the crafting of a trusted and safe space where vulnerabilities can be revealed and explored (Corlett, Ruane & Mavin, 2021). This requires challenge, openness, honesty, and confidentiality to engage in relational processes of learning; while *critical action learning* emphasises the role of unconscious processes of learning in groups.

Critical action learning draws on the application of systems–psychodynamic thinking, and the value of this approach lies in its ability to ‘lift the lid’ on organizational life (Huffington, Armstrong, Halton, Hoyle & Pooley, 2004; Obholzer & Roberts, 2019). This helps us see and hear what lies beneath the surface in organizations, to gain a better understanding of – and new ways of thinking about – power and vulnerability. Systems–psychodynamic thinking also highlights individual and collective unconscious defences (e.g., avoiding conflict, denial) against shared anxieties, group dynamics and organizational culture (Armstrong & Rustin, 2015). For more information see also Brissett, Sher and Smith (2019); Gould, Stapley and Stein (2006); and Sadler (2011).

Importantly from a practitioner point of view, Sadler (2011) argues that it is a myth that only those trained in psychoanalysis, psychotherapy, and counselling can make appropriate use of psychodynamic ideas and theoretical perspectives. Sadler argues psychodynamic concepts can also be applied in coaching and consultancy, for example, to help create conditions that change the dynamics of a work system in a more effective and sustainable way. These ideas match well with one of the goals of this case study, namely the development of compassion in an open system. But first we need to introduce the action learning group.

### **The action learning group**

We came together after an internal university event where Kathryn presented a workshop: *Seeing intersectionality through the lens of compassion*, which concluded with the questions: *What next? Action research? Action learning?* The latter question resonated with colleagues in the workshop, and resulted in a self–selecting action learning group comprised of seven participants: five academics (from social sciences; life sciences; the business school) and two members of the interfaith advisory team (from professional services). We all shared a commitment to putting compassion into practice in the context of the university’s strategic value of ‘being compassionate’ (see above). We met ‘formally’ (i.e., as a facilitated group) from January to July 2018, and then continued to work together as writers and chapter authors. Kathryn and Yusuf co–facilitated the process of action learning (Waddington & Kaplan, 2021); Jenni brought insights from her doctoral research into mindfulness and facilitated creation of stories of self–compassion (Nowlan, 2021). Other members of the group brought perspectives on compassion from business psychology (Matthewman, 2021); resilience (Haroun, 2021); higher education policy in England (Pedersen, 2021); and Buddhism (Morris, in Waddington, 2021b). As a group we co–created shared stories from practice about

self-compassion, organizational compassion, and action learning in times of turbulence and change.

### Stories from practice

Storytelling helps listeners understand the essence of complex concepts and ideas in meaningful and often personal ways. Because of this, scientists are beginning to embrace storytelling to understand how the brain processes this powerful form of communication (Suzuki, Feliú-Mojér, Hasson, Yehuda & Zarate 2018). Stories help people make sense of their experience in organizations and are a way of being, communicating, relating to and with each other in the spirit of shared humanity (Maclean, Harvey & Chia, 2012). Shared humanity is a core component of self-compassion, which is defined as: *Self-kindness versus self-judgment, feelings of common humanity versus isolation, and mindfulness versus over-identification* (Neff, 2011, p. 4, emphasis added).

## Action learning as a practice

First, a note on terminology; we use the terms action learning set and action learning group interchangeably, as this reflects terminology used in the literature (e.g., Vince, 2008; Wood, 2020). We also note that when the abbreviated term for an action learning set (ALS) is used in the literature, it more often describes the skills and practice of action learning. The term action learning group, on the other hand, is more often used to describe the underlying group processes, emotions, and dynamics. Therefore, *action learning as a practice* involves: a) development of skills of questioning, listening, feedback, respectful challenge, self-awareness, and critical reflection; and b) attention to group processes, dynamics, and underlying emotions. However, we have avoided using acronyms such as ALS because we want to take a more inclusive approach to the both the process and practice of action learning. Furthermore, acronyms minimise the complexity and richness of emotions associated with compassion. While acronyms cannot be completely avoided in scientific writing, mindful writers ‘will notice that most abbreviations are unnecessary and will choose to replace them with the meaningful words that underlie them’ (Hales, Williams & Rector, 2017, p. 3).

The principles of action learning (see Brook, Pedler & Burgoyne, 2012; Pedler, 2021) used to guide co-facilitation of the action learning group are summarised in Box 1. Co-facilitation was deemed necessary to share the emotion work involved in creating a safe space where vulnerabilities could be revealed and explored (Corlett et al., 2021).

**Box 1**  
**Principles of action learning**

**Effective action learning is characterised by:**

- profound personal and professional development resulting from reflection upon action;
- working with problems/issues, but acknowledging there no right answers;
- problems/issues focus organizational as well as personal development;
- action learners working in sets of peers ('comrades in adversity') who both support and challenge each other.

In addition to the principles outlined in Box 1, we also approached action learning as a form of inquiry. The framework guiding co-facilitation and learning in the group (see Figure 1) drew upon Waddington and Lister's (2013) academic-practitioner research into universities' human resource management strategies and academic engagement.

Figure 1

Framework for compassionate academic-practitioner inquiry (adapted from Waddington and Lister, 2013, p.14)



## A snapshot of the action learning process

Figure 1 represents an ongoing process of critical reflection and action, rather than a single cycle or iteration. We engaged in many critical compassionate conversations, explained below as a 'snapshot' of the action learning process. Photographs are also included to illustrate and highlight key concepts.

The group shared ideas and activities for the ‘mindful minute’ exercises outlined in Table 1. For example, Jenni shared meditations from her mindfulness practice, and Yusuf created a one-minute timer from two small, recycled water bottles, filled with sand (see Figure 2).

Table 1  
Action learning structure

Structure of a 2-hour action learning session
1. <b>Check in:</b> where participants talked briefly about any immediate issues they had at the start of the meeting
2. <b>A mindful minute exercise:</b> for example, focused breathing, to enable participants to pay full attention to the action learning task and process
3. <b>Bids for airtime:</b> where individuals indicated whether they had any issues/problems they would like to explore
4. <b>Feedback:</b> from participant/s who had explored issues in the previous meeting’s ‘airtime’ slot (see below)
5. <b>Negotiated airtime slots:</b> where up to two participants presented their issue/problem and the rest of the group helped them think through the issues, reflect, create options, and identify potential action/s
6. <b>Group reflection:</b> on process, for example exploring the dynamics in the group
7. <b>A mindful minute exercise:</b> to mark the ending of the meeting.

Figure 2  
A ‘mindful minute’ timer (photograph taken by Yusuf Kaplan, with permission)



Mindfully attending to the grains of sand was a very powerful way to experience ‘a minute’ in a hectic day. At times, as ‘comrades in adversity’ (a term originally coined by Reg Revans) the group found it challenging/difficult to leave the ‘adverse conditions’ outside of the action learning space. For example, Kathryn sometimes physically turned around 360 degrees to ‘shake off’ and leave the hostile weather conditions (as I sometimes saw it) behind! We all needed to leave metaphorical ‘wet clothes’ and other such hindrances, like workloads and marking, outside to focus on compassion in action in the group. This involved noticing and reinforcing/amplifying positive experiences, such as ‘compassionate communication’ reflected in the care with which content was written, and a warm tone used in emails.

Noticing and reinforcing/amplifying positive experiences and examples of compassion extended beyond the ‘formal’ lifespan of the action learning group. An example of how compassion was infused and embedded into emails is illustrated in Box 2; an extract of an email sent from a senior academic leader to doctoral (PhD) researchers at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic in March 2020 (reproduced with permission).

**Box 2**  
**Compassionate communication during COVID-19**

**Date:** 15/03/2020 10:49  
**To:** PhD Researchers  
**Cc:** Kathryn Waddington

Dear PhD researchers

You will have received various communications regarding the crisis from the Graduate School. Our intention is not to overwhelm you.  
[Practical information follows regarding the transition to online working and working from home]

Please remember this – since it is an unprecedented crisis, we don’t have all the answers. But we do know this – panic never helps. We should be cautious; we should be concerned and the best way to handle this is by being concerned not just about ourselves but also those around us. Empathy and compassion will help immensely.

Best wishes to you all  
Sam\*

*Email extract from a senior leader \* pseudonym*

Email is an inevitable and time-consuming aspect of work, which other researchers have described as ‘work about the work’:

I’ve come to the conclusion that it’s just work; email is just work; it’s where your work gets done, so before, you’d go and sit in a room and you’d talk about something or people would phone each other . . . but really now, what takes time with email is not often writing the email, it’s thinking. So, if someone emails me about a research project . . . it’s not writing the email that takes the time, *it’s thinking about the question they’ve asked* (Zukas & Malcolm, 2017, p. 516, emphasis added).

Thinking about how emails are composed and answered is also important, but not all emails reflect the care and compassion communicated in the extract in Box 2. Negative examples and experience of failures of compassion can be framed as ‘compassion gaps’, which reflect the objectification and measurement of students and staff, where people are reduced to faceless resources to be manipulated and managed (Waddington, 2016). The idea of negative compassion gaps interspersed with positive examples of compassion led the group to reflect upon the idea and image of ‘*islands of compassion in stormy seas*’, and the importance of self-compassion. We now share some of our stories of self-compassion – presented in accordance with American Association of Psychology (APA, 2020) guidance for maintaining confidentiality. Therefore, some of the action learning material and examples from practice have been changed slightly or presented differently, but without fundamentally altering meaning.

## Stories of self-compassion

The UK sculptor Antony Gormley’s statue *Another Time* (on Margate beach England, see Figure 3) facilitated further reflection upon the development of ‘self-compassion in stormy seas’. The statue is made of cast iron, and explores the experience of being human, and of inhabiting a human body:

The history of western sculpture has been concerned with movement. I wish to celebrate the still and silent nature of the sculpture. The work is designed to be placed within the flow of lived time. (Gormley, n.d., p. 2)

Figure 3

Self-compassion in stormy seas (photograph taken by Kathryn Waddington, with permission)



The statue is visible at low tide, but is unharmed by stormy seas because it is made of cast iron. It becomes completely submerged and invisible at high tide. As the tide goes out the statue re-emerges, resilient and unscathed, which for us reflected the cyclical nature of academic work and university life. For example, there are high tides and 'bottlenecks' of marking; and high workloads associated with the beginning and end of the academic year. But just as the tide subsides, a more even pace of working returns. Figure 3 helped to put heavier workloads into perspective and highlighted the need for heightened self-compassion during busy times.

One example of an action of self-kindness was to resist student requests that entailed additional weekend working, and simply allowing Sunday evenings off without guilt. Another was acknowledgment that it was time to take some leave to process recent personal events, and that colleagues were supportive and could cover. Other changes experienced were to stop a 'survivor syndrome' feeling associated with organizational change (e.g., Bui, Chau & Cox, 2019) by taking time to practice meditation, yoga practice, and positive psychology. Another example was acceptance of suffering and feelings of anxiety, which then allowed strategies to be formulated to release the self-imposed guilt of not being 'good enough'. Another feeling explored within the group was of 'self-bullying' – expressed as negative and disparaging internal dialogue – which led to a realisation that it was time to practice and model self-compassion. Not just for oneself, but for others, as role models for students and colleagues.

There are two underlying themes in these selected extracts of our shared stories: a) being too harsh towards ourselves; and b) expecting too much from ourselves. There were times when we had pushed ourselves too far and had overlooked the need for self-compassion and self-kindness (Neff, 2011). But we were beginning to recognise this, acknowledging feelings that we could not continue on our current paths for much longer; something had to change. Action learning gave us space to open up to each other, explore our feelings, vulnerabilities, and make necessary adjustments to our ways of being. These stories of self-compassion have named – and challenged – aspects of neoliberal higher education where overwork and 'always on' ways of working prevail (Zukas & Malcolm, 2017). They show how resistance, resilience, and change are possible, particularly when seen from a wider systemic, rather than purely personal perspective. This is addressed in the next section, which explores co-facilitation and supervision of action learning through the lenses of systems-psychodynamic thinking and social dreaming.

## Co-facilitation and supervision of action learning

We approached action learning as a form of inquiry, which has been likened to continually weaving between inner and outer arcs of attention and maintaining curiosity about the part we play in ‘creating and sustaining patterns of action, interaction and non-action’ (Marshall, 2016, p. xvii). Kathryn and Yusuf as co-facilitators both have experience and understanding of the application of systems-psychodynamic thinking and the importance of attending to both the primary task *and* group processes. The primary task of action learning is to enable learning whilst simultaneously implementing action/s. Without careful facilitation, action learning groups can quickly slip from a position of ‘learning in action’ to one of ‘learning inaction’ (Vince, 2008, p. 93). Facilitation therefore required what Svalgaard (2017, p. 29) refers to as ‘double awareness’. Their case study of an intensive five-day ‘action learning lab’ in Denmark is a good example of how attending to real world business challenges – the *task* – whilst also being mindful of *group processes* can be achieved in practice.

In this case study the primary task of the action learning group was to spread the presence of compassion in a university system within participants’ areas of practice and influence. Facilitation required alertness to anti-task behaviours, such as avoiding conflict over competing priorities or failing to adapt/relate to a changing environment. These behaviours arise as defences against anxiety in social systems, and are unconscious processes that arise in all groups, not just action learning groups:

‘Defences’ are constructed as a means of coping with such anxieties, and they become embedded and enforced within the structure, rules and cultures of institutions as routine assumptions and practices that become taken for granted (Armstrong & Rustin, 2015, p. 15).

Reflective supervision was an important way of attending to unconscious processes, and to ensure that any difficult emotions that emerged were addressed. Supervision took place usually the day after the action learning set meeting, or as soon as possible afterwards. This allowed us to ‘sleep’ on the experience, and for the formation of overnight thoughts, and night-time dreams. This known as ‘social dreaming’, which provides access to the unconscious as a ‘picture’ representing the relationship between ourselves and the world (Lawrence, 2010). It is important for readers to note that the concept of social dreaming enables sensemaking, *not directly in relation to the individual*, but in relation to the *context/environment* in which the dream is shared (Archer, 2021).

## Social dreaming methodology

Social dreaming methodology offered a unique approach to supervision in this action learning case study. W. Gordon Lawrence (1934–2013), a social scientist at the Tavistock Institute in London, initiated the field of social dreaming in the early 1980s. It is most often used as a method of sharing night-time dreams in a group to create shared – as opposed to personal/individual – meanings in a ‘social dreaming matrix’. More recently social dreaming has been advanced as different and creative way of re/thinking about contemporary dilemmas and issues such as global warming (Manley, 2020).

Lawrence believed that everyone dreams whilst a member of an organization, and that dreams offer a different perspective on the organization, tapping into the unconscious life of its members in their roles. In essence, social dreaming:

Celebrates the discovery of the unconscious, the *inner voice of humanity* present in dream thoughts—surprising epiphanies—and attempts to find their truth, no matter where it will lead (Lawrence, 2010, p.8, emphasis added).

Listening to the inner voice of shared humanity is key to developing self-compassion and understanding the concept of compassion in organizations. Reflective supervision that uses social dreaming requires skilful facilitation and knowledge of psychodynamic theory and practice. In this case study social dreaming methodology was used in conjunction with action learning to gain understanding of the dream offered in relation to the wider higher education context. Therefore, the task of Coreene, our supervisor, was not to interpret the dream, but rather to offer associations, explore meanings and relationship to compassion. Shared dreams were seen as data, which provided us with an alternative entry point to aid understanding about the formation and development of the action learning group. Two dreams – one from Kathryn and one from Yusuf – are now given as illustrative examples. We each experienced these ‘dreams as data’ after different action learning meetings. They are reproduced here with permission, with the aim of illustrating how social dreaming helped us to make sense of our experience of co-facilitation from a critical action learning perspective. Further discussion of how ‘dreaming of compassion’ was facilitated and used in reflective supervision can be found in Archer (2021).

*Kathryn's dream:*

*I was with a group of people that I knew on a train that was in a station. As we were sitting on the train looking around and chatting, I realised that we were on the wrong train and that we need to*

*cross over the bridge and change trains to be in the right place. I turned to my companions and told them that we were in the wrong place and that we needed to change platforms. I was surprised by their lack of concern about the fact that we had made this mistake and continued to talk to each other in a relaxed way. After trying to get them to understand the urgency of the situation, I decided that if I didn't move that I would miss the train. So, I got all my stuff, got off the train, changed platforms and got onto the right train. I remember sitting looking out of the window as the train began to move and the others were left behind.*

This dream was shared halfway through the lifespan of the group, when commitment to the group had diminished and membership had fallen from ten to seven. This was associated in the above dream as: a) a strong shift in the momentum of the core group; and b) ongoing exploration of the impact of spreading compassion into our areas of practice and influence. Yusuf shared the following dream towards the end of the 'formal' action learning set.

*Yusuf's dream:*

*I remember being in a van, that I needed to use to clear a space. The van was old and a bit shaky, it was also really big and felt too large for the task ahead, but it was the only option that I had. As I was driving along, I remember being worried whether the van was good enough ... next thing I remember was being at the side of the road, waiting for someone (I think roadside assistance) to help me as the tyre had burst and the engine had over-heated. The thing I remember the most from the dream was the feeling of sadness and despair. It was a very heavy feeling.*

The strongest association with this dream was a theme of loss, as action learning, which had provided a clear space for compassion and care, was coming to an end. Compassion and compassionate leadership require both courage and vulnerability to admit to not knowing, uncertainty, ambiguity and frailty (Aram, 2014). These were all part of the lived experience of the action learning group, its co-facilitators, and the stories of self-compassion that were shared, which are now seen and discussed through the theoretical lens of compassion.

## **Critical lenses of compassion: From practice to theory**

There are various ways that compassion can be defined. A scientific approach views compassion as an emotional state, a motivation, a dispositional trait, or a cultivated attitude (Goetz & Simon-Thomas, 2017). When looking at compassion at an organizational level of analysis, the concept takes on further attributes as a dynamic and relational process involving: a) noticing that suffering is present in an organization;

b) feeling empathic concern for the people suffering; and c) taking action to alleviate suffering in some manner (Worline & Dutton, 2017). Compassion in organizations can also be understood through three theoretical lenses of: narrative; interpersonal work; and organising (Frost et al., 2006), summarised in Table 2.

Table 2

Critical lenses of compassion (adapted from Frost et al., 2006, p. 845)

Critical lenses of compassion
<p><b>Compassion as narrative:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>■ Compassion is carried in language and stories</li><li>■ Compassion narratives reflect hidden pain, suffering and distress</li><li>■ Narratives are powerful windows into individual and collective identities</li><li>■ Narratives reveal emotional aspects of groups and shared values and beliefs at the heart of organizations</li><li>■ Reflects multiple voices and perspectives revealing diversity and difference.</li></ul>
<p><b>Compassion as interpersonal work:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>■ Compassion as everyday interaction that requires skill and competence</li><li>■ Interpersonal work is seen as important, productive work</li><li>■ Can take place via a range of media (e.g., online and face-to-face)</li><li>■ Involves expenditure of cognitive and emotional energy</li><li>■ May be gendered/less visible than other forms of interpersonal interaction</li><li>■ Small acts of compassion can have large benefits and consequences.</li></ul>
<p><b>Compassion as organising:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>■ Compassion as a collective accomplishment</li><li>■ Different processes enable people to notice, feel and respond to pain</li><li>■ Aspects of the organizational context enable or impede noticing, feeling and responding</li><li>■ Compassion occurs when individual behaviours are valued, and systems are in place to enable diffusion of compassion across all levels</li><li>■ Compassion as organising is non-linear and dynamic.</li></ul>

Although the three lenses in Table 2 are markedly different from each other, all have some relevance to this case study of compassion in action. For example, through the diffusion of compassion across all levels (*organising*); and compassion as everyday interaction (*interpersonal work*). However, the lens of *compassion as narrative* resonates more strongly with the stories from practice shared in this paper and underpinned how we made sense of our compassionate conversations and critical reflections.

## Compassion as narrative

There was very little ethnic diversity in the action learning group, which was striking, and the narrative in this case study is limited to the extent that it reveals diversity and difference. In supervision we reflected further on the possibility that compassion may have felt less relevant or accessible to Black, Asian and minority ethnic colleagues. The notion of suffering is core to all definitions and approaches to compassion, arising from the Latin *compati*, which means to ‘suffer with’, and may be associated with sentimental and patronising discourses of pity. It was clear however that the underlying need for compassion was carried in the language and issues brought to the group during ‘air time’. For example, a very heavy workload was described in one session as the feeling of being overwhelmed by a Tsunami. The Antony Gormley statue in Figure 3 (which represented ‘self-compassion in stormy seas’) was a helpful image with which to ‘reinterpret’ this ‘Tsunami story’. The trust and safety that developed in the action learning group allowed for vulnerabilities to be surfaced and shared and reflected in the stories of self compassion.

These stories and reflective conversations revealed our assumptions, values and beliefs about what being compassionate meant to us, individually and collectively. The core values of compassion shared by the action learning group related primarily to: *authenticity, courage, understanding, empathy, caring, helping, fostering human connection, and practice*. The lens of compassion as narrative also offered powerful windows into individual and collective identities (Frost et al., 2006). To recap, the action learning group involved academics and practitioners from the interfaith team learning together in a ‘third space’, and this was an important and powerful feature of this case study. The paper now draws to a close with consideration of third space working, and what this means for work and organizational psychology.

## Working in the third space/s

Third space/s represents areas where two (or more) cultures intersect and draw on the qualities of each other (Bhaba, 1994). In a higher education organizational context, Whitchurch (2008) uses the term ‘third space professionals’ to define and describe individuals who reject the notion of a gap, or separation, between academic and professional services roles and functions. Professional services roles typically relate to areas that support core functions of a university, such as human resources, staff and organizational development, student and academic services. Third space professionals

tend to perform ‘blended’ or ‘hybrid’ roles, working in spaces ‘of resistance to conventional understandings, norms, and binaries’ (Whitchurch, 2013, p. 23). Working in a third space also offers a useful framework for understanding and exploring the experience and practice of individuals who work and operate across traditional boundaries. For instance, ‘boundary spanners’, such as marketing executives and sales representatives, who proactively employ activities that cut across organizational boundaries to generate and mediate knowledge flows (e.g., Keszey, 2018; van Meerkerk & Edelenbos, 2018). However, there is little to be found in the work and organizational psychology literature about third space working as conceptualised by Bhaba (1994), and Whitchurch (2008; 2013). Therefore, we now reflect on working in third space/s, what this means for us as work and organizational psychologists and practitioners.

### **Reflections on working in third space/s**

Early drafts of this paper were written during periods of Covid-19 working restrictions, which have had a longer-term impact on work beyond academia. A recent survey by Eurofound (2020) shows that the majority of workers in the EU have a preference for working from home at least occasionally, even if there were no Covid-19 restrictions. The most popular preference (32%) was for a flexible, hybrid way of working: that is, being in the office/workplace for some of the week, and teleworking remotely at home/elsewhere for the remainder. We hope that our reflections here may also inform thinking about what third space working means for flexible and hybrid ways of working in a post Covid-19 world.

As co-authors we engaged in critical reflective conversations in the times and ‘spaces’ that were available to us. For Kathryn and Jenni as academics and practitioners working in a (then) predominantly online environment, this was more often in the relative warmth and comfort of our ‘internal’ working spaces at home. For Yusuf, because of the nature of his role as interfaith advisor and practitioner providing support across a number of university sites, this sometimes involved a variety of ‘external’ spaces. A particularly memorable reflective online conversation took place with Jenni and Kathryn with their laptops at home, and Yusuf with his mobile phone on a cold, sunny, but windy bench in Regents Park, London. Technically, it involved Yusuf muting his microphone to minimise wind and traffic noise when not speaking. This led us to reflect further on the openings for ‘deep listening’ that unexpectedly arose in Covid-19 inflicted spaces and places. We had to listen hard to what each other was saying about what working in third space/s meant to us in terms of our assumptions and values, which we share below.

*Jenni:* There is a certain hybridity within our academic practice as work and organizational psychologists that requires us to act as unbounded professionals in the sense that we are expected to work in different areas, and with varying tasks, with ease. In a previous role as a course leader third space working included keeping up to date with research around specialist recruitment, benchmarking against competitor institutions, and student funding. I did this by attending conferences, workshops and networking with others in similar roles at other universities, many of whom held roles that were outside of an academic role. My third space working has now extended to include my professional doctoral research: *Developing mindfulness in higher education*. Being a practitioner–researcher is an integral aspect of undertaking a professional doctorate and is about being: ‘A professional whose actions and decision–making processes are not bound by the traditional way of doing things, who has critical curiosity about their professional world’ (Fulton, Kuit, Sanders & Smith, 2013, p. 25). In undertaking the professional doctorate, I have considered in some depth what has led to my personal values of equity, freedom and compassion, and how I can action them in the workplace.

*Kathryn:* For me, working in the third space resonates with Marshall’s (2016) image of weaving between internal and external arcs of attention. My ‘internal space’ relates to my identity as a practice–based academic working in the field of work and organizational psychology, with a professional background in nursing and healthcare. Thinking about my identity as an academic was triggered by a seemingly simple question over thirty years ago by a senior psychologist. On completion of a part–time degree and ready to move into my first academic role they asked me a critical question: *So, Kathryn, what will you be now? An academic–nurse? or nurse–academic? Think about it!* The question troubled me at first: *What sort of academic am I?* Then I reflected further and realised at that point in my career I was both a nurse and an academic, and that this was a strength because it helped me see the world through different lenses. My values now as a work and organizational psychologist are still strongly linked to care, compassion and practice. In my ‘external space’ as a researcher, I value academic–practitioner collaboration, and scholarship that matters and makes a difference in practice.

*Yusuf:* Being a third space practitioner to me means weaving different traditions together to inform my approach in the present moment of applied action. I feel I’m an eclectic by nature, happy to keep an open mind trying out new ideas to discover their meaning and learn from experience. As Interfaith Adviser, the role I inhabit is very much between and among all kinds of identities, so naming it as third space helps create that space, setting the task in role apart or even beyond pairs and opposites. My practice in the third space

is remarkably anchored in the solid ground of reality, and my core values are creativity and patience, which my father ‘gave’ me. I often use meditative practice to inform my work, and I generally call that ‘*everyday awareness*’, from an expansive spaciousness to the fine focus of single-pointed attention, and the broad range of modes between. For me, the Sufi mystic and poet Rumi (n.d. trans. Coleman Barks) captures the spiritual dimension of this practitioner stance: *Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and right doing, there is a field. I'll meet you there.*

In summary, this case study is based around academic-practitioner collaboration and action learning as inquiry (Marshall, 2016). It has illustrated the role of academic work and organizational psychologists as ‘third space’ practitioners in a compassionate organizational development initiative using academic-practitioner co-facilitation of critical action learning. Academic-practitioner relationships built on trust and shared vulnerabilities were crucial components in this case study. The metaphor of *interface* has been used to define and describe academic-practitioner relationships as:

A means or place of interaction between two *systems*, organizations, etc; a meeting-point or *common ground* between two parties, systems, or *disciplines*; also, *interaction, liaison, dialogue* (Bartunek & McKenzie, 2018, p. 2. emphasis added).

We conclude now with some final reflections on the nature of academic-practitioner relationship using the metaphor of *weaving a narrative* (rather than interface), which we consider to be a more accurate representation of third space ways of working.

### **Weaving a narrative**

The art of weaving is the creation of fabric using intersecting threads and materials. The idea of weaving a narrative brings a combinatory view, where academic and practitioner perspectives can be synthesised into a coherent body of research and practice that adopts/ includes multiple stakeholder viewpoints (Burgelman et al., 2018; Carter, 2018). Third space ways of working and weaving academic-practitioner narratives challenge narrow neoliberal agendas beyond instrumentality and individualism. They also offer new pathways that can broaden the scope and boundaries of future work and organizational psychology practice and research.

## **Conclusion**

Research that comes from an academic-practitioner perspective will lead to useful, new, and practical theories and theorising in work and organizational psychology. We agree with Dewe and Cooper (2021, p. 83) who argue that our responsibilities now rest on

‘beginning a process of challenging and refining accepted pathways’. But what might this look like? The final photograph (Figure 4) was taken in the Yorkshire Wolds in the UK; it illustrates the intersections that can be found in our weaving a narrative approach.

Figure 4

Weaving a narrative of intersections (photograph taken by Geoff Sawyer, with permission)



Starting at the top, Figure 4 can be seen to represent the intersection and merging of practitioner and academic paths, meeting to become a broader shared way in common. One goes around the hill while the other comes straight down; there may also be a fourth ‘sidetrack’ obscured from view, or a less used path along the upper edge of the left-hand field. The landscape here, as defined by its contours, shows that their meeting point is in a lower, more sheltered spot, which (metaphorically) reflects ‘what lies beneath’. In other words the unconscious processes and defences revealed by insights from a systems–psychodynamic approach, and social dreaming methodology that have underpinned the case study.

We hope this paper about action learning as a practice and example of compassion in action in a university has stimulated readers to think in new or different ways. There are clearly other ways to consider action learning beyond the approach described here, such as business driven action learning, and virtual action learning (Brook et al., 2012; Cho, 2013). However, at the heart of action learning is the notion that people learn most effectively when working on issues in their own work settings. Working compassionately with comrades in adversity is a key underpinning principle, drawn from Revans’ (2011) original premise that those best able to help in developing the self are those who also struggle to understand themselves. This implies a relationship with trusted others – *comrades* – who can help each other to free themselves from the suffering – *adversity* – that is part of day-to-day organizational experience in contemporary organizations and workplaces.

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# An introduction to the Trait Personality Inventory

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## Abstract

This article introduces the Trait Personality Inventory (referred to simply as *Trait*), designed and published online by Aston Business Assessments. Trait is a measure of 13 personality dimensions, which are used by practitioners and clients in a range of settings including recruitment and selection, employee and leadership development, and coaching. I provide an overview of Trait and the practical set-up of the tool, including the reports available to practitioners. This is followed by reliability and validity evidence, highlighting the scientific foundations and practice implications from research using Trait. Finally, example cases of clients using Trait in different sectors and assessment settings are described, highlighting relevant implications for using the tool in practice and applications of personality assessment more widely.

*Keywords:* Trait Personality Inventory, personality assessment, trait measurement, employee development, recruitment and selection, online assessment

## Introduction

This article introduces the Trait Personality Inventory, designed and published online by Aston Business Assessments, providing an overview of the tool and its application. A summary of the design of the Trait inventory and its set-up for practice work is described in the first part of the article. This is followed by a discussion of the scientific foundations of the tool and example cases of where it has been applied by clients in different assessment settings.

Aston Business Assessments (ABA) was set up as a work and organizational psychology consultancy and assessment developer in 2010, with the idea of *simple, effective assessment solutions* embedded in approaches to work with clients. This ethos motivated the design and development of the Trait Personality Inventory (referred to simply as Trait), which is introduced in this article. Two guiding questions framed the design of Trait:

- What are the most important characteristics to measure for assessment at work and in organizations?
- How could these be measured and presented in a simple and accessible way, whilst maintaining psychometric robustness of the instrument?

The Trait Personality Inventory is a 127-item measure of 13 dimensions of personality (see Table 1). The inventory has been designed specifically for use in occupational and work-related settings for the primary purposes of recruitment and individual development. However, the instrument is also applied in a variety of other settings, for example vocational education, coaching, performance management, high potential management and succession planning.

The item set for Trait was constructed following a deductive approach (see Burisch, 1984) with item trialling proceeding over two studies to reduce the initial item pool from 261 to the final 127 items. The inventory was designed to cover the 'Big Five' personality domains (Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Emotional Stability and Openness, Goldberg, 1990) to provide comprehensive coverage of personality space. The scale structure was then designed to provide an optimal level of detail and granularity, sitting between the higher-order Big Five domains, and narrower lower-level facets measured in instruments such as the NEO-PI (Costa & McCrae, 1992). This structural design was adopted based on evidence in the literature of stronger criterion validities of personality traits measured below the broad Big Five domains (e.g., Paunonen & Aston, 2001). Measuring sub-dimensions of the Big Five also permits easier matching of key traits to job requirements in practice, which, in turn, improves validity (see e.g., Hogan & Holland, 2003). Each Big Five dimension was therefore represented in two sub-dimensions, and a further three dimensions relevant to workplace assessment were also included, giving the final 13-dimension structure (see Table 1). The workplace assessment dimensions were identified based on research literatures on individual differences and criterion effects at work: Sensitivity (e.g., as a component of trait emotional intelligence; Petrides, 2009), Achievement (e.g., Vinchur, Schippmann, Switzer & Roth, 1998), and Optimism (e.g., Avey, Luthans, Smith & Palmer, 2010).

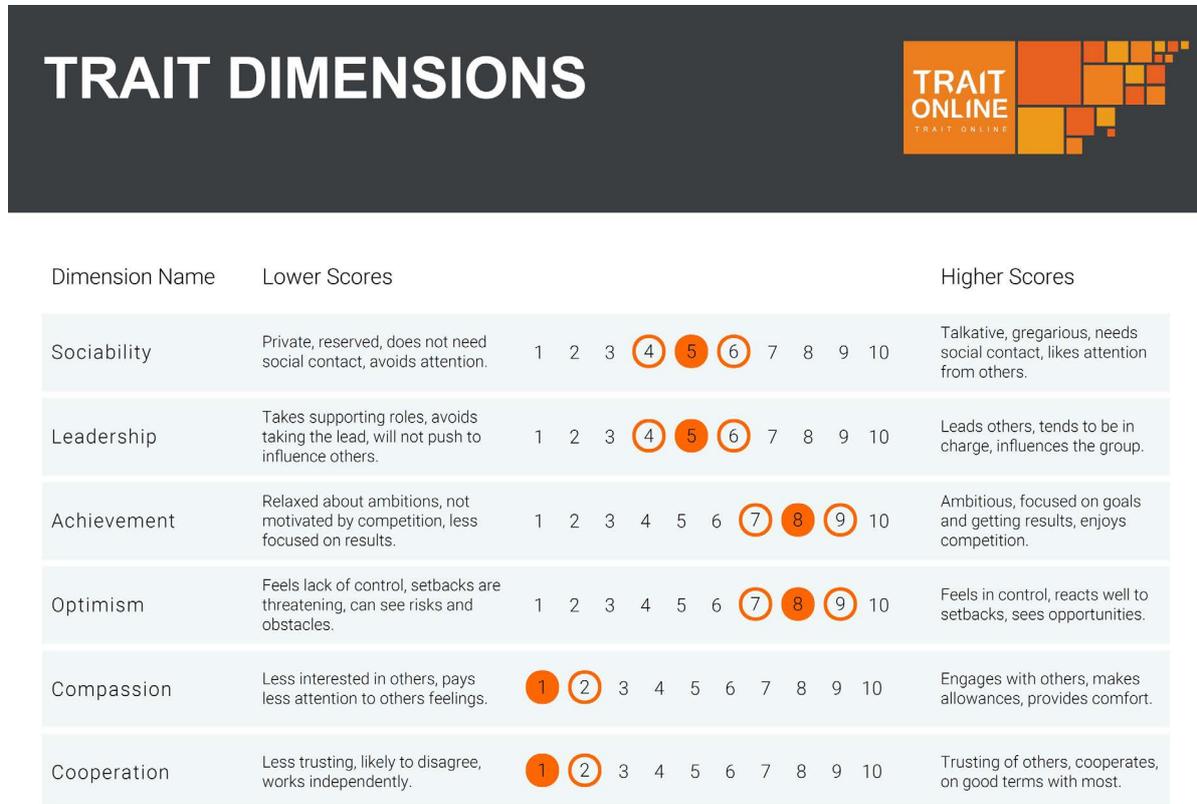
Table 1  
Dimensions of the Trait Personality Inventory

Dimension	Description The extent to which:
<b>Sociability</b>	someone seeks and enjoys social interaction with others, how likely they are to initiate and develop social contacts and are comfortable doing so.
<b>Leadership</b>	people prefer to take a higher profile in groups, to be socially ascendant, to seek recognition and to lead others to achieve.
<b>Optimism</b>	people feel generally positive and in control of their world, and people's expectations about their own successes.
<b>Achievement</b>	people are ambitious, competitive, and achievement-oriented in respect of goals and objectives.
<b>Compassion</b>	people are interested in and affected by the problems and feelings of others.
<b>Cooperation</b>	people prefer to cooperate with others at work, and to help others without expecting or seeking something in return.
<b>Sensitivity</b>	people are attuned to emotions, and aware of them in themselves and others.
<b>Orderliness</b>	people are organised and rule conscious, prefer to work according to plans, and conduct activities in a methodical and orderly manner.
<b>Industriousness</b>	people are reliable, hardworking, and committed to finishing tasks and projects they start.
<b>Stability</b>	individuals appear relaxed and carefree, versus anxious, worrisome or apprehensive, particularly in response to pressure or challenges.
<b>Calmness</b>	people are generally calm, tranquil, and less bothered by irritation, anger or frustration.
<b>Culture</b>	people enjoy new experiences and are generally positive about change and working in new cultures.
<b>Intellect</b>	people are intellectual, and interested and open to abstract or theoretical ideas, or complex problem-solving.

Trait is a normative instrument, in which standardized scores are produced through comparison with established norm groups. Respondents use a 5-point Likert scale (1= *Strongly Disagree* to 5 = *Strongly Agree*) to indicate their agreement with each of the 127 statements. Scales are constructed using a mix of positively and negatively keyed items to ensure that the opposing poles of each dimension are adequately captured. The items are designed around a common stem to enable easy reading, making the average completion time for respondents whose first language is English, around 10–12 minutes. For the purposes of client feedback, scale scores are presented on the sten scale (see example in Figure 1).

Figure 1

Example summary page presentation of scores on six of the thirteen trait dimensions (from the Trait Selection Report)



Trait is hosted on a dedicated assessment platform (Trait Online), which enables clients to access the assessment for use with respondents. A series of output reports are also accessible to clients, explaining the implications of the assessment scores for work behaviour, performance and development. Reports are designed to be easy to use and understand, and include features such as interview questions for selection, likely development needs and possible interventions and solutions to explore with respondents. Specific reports are available for practitioners for use in different settings (see Table 2).

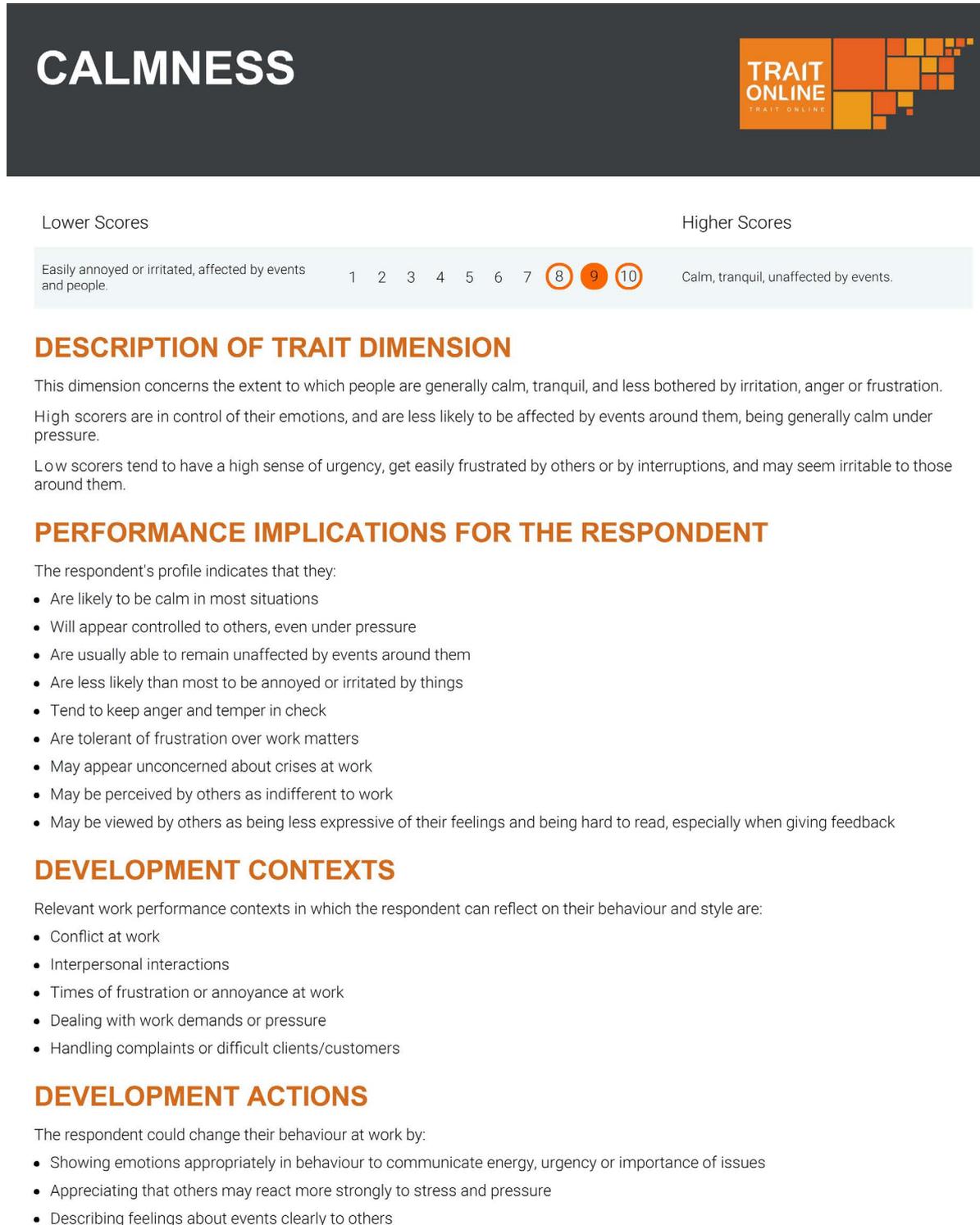
Evidence and theory are used to inform the content and structure of the output reports. For example, the *Trait Development* report (see example page in Figure 2) draws on Trait Activation Theory (Tett & Burnett, 2003) and identifies the work contexts within which each dimension can be explored with respondents (e.g., social and interpersonal settings with dimensions such as Sociability and Cooperation).

Table 2  
Types of reports for the Trait Personality Inventory

Report	Features and Practice Area
<b>Trait Selection Report</b>	Full Trait profile, detailed descriptions of performance implications, and suggested interview questions. For use in recruitment and selection assessments.
<b>Trait Development Report</b>	Full Trait profile, detailed descriptions of performance implications, and suggested development recommendations. Designed for use in employee development and training (e.g., one-to-one feedback and coaching, or group development).
<b>Competency Insights Report</b>	Scores on nine job competencies, descriptions of behavioural implications, detailed recommendations for development through coaching, on-job development and training. For use in competency-based assessment systems and in selection and development programmes.
<b>Trait Leadership Evaluation</b>	Scores on ten leadership competencies, descriptions for behavioural implications and guidance for development. For use in leadership development programmes, and one-to-one executive coaching.
<b>Assessor Exploration Guide</b>	Fully structured guide to providing developmental feedback from the Trait Personality Inventory, including scripted discussion prompts to explore the Trait dimension scores. For use in one-to-one feedback and developmental discussions with respondents.
<b>Trait Sales Profile</b>	Short version of Trait focusing on six competencies needed for sales work, including performance implications, and selection recommendations. For use in recruitment and selection in sales settings.
<b>Trait Respondent Summary Report</b>	Short, narrative-only (i.e., no scores shown) summary report to provide written feedback to respondents. For use in settings where brief feedback to respondents is needed, but face-to-face feedback may not be possible.
<b>Trait Scan</b>	Short report that provides scores on the 13 Trait dimensions, and short descriptions of behavioural implications. For use when a brief overview of the Trait profile is required.

Figure 2

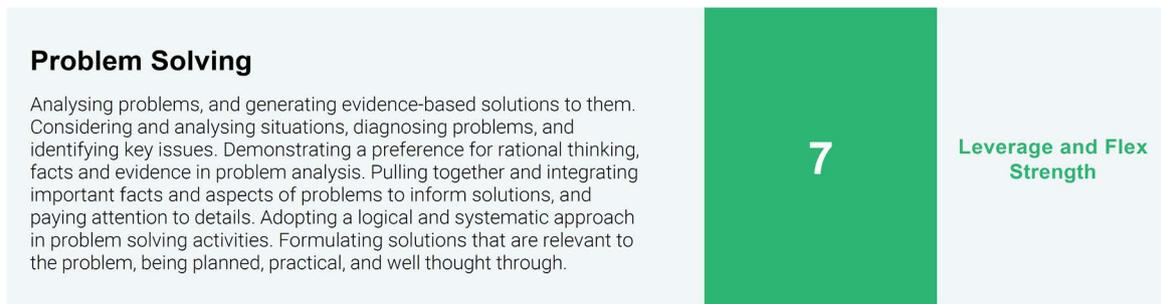
Example page showing profile detail and developmental guidance for the Trait dimension *Calmness* showing contexts and recommended actions (from the Trait Development Report)



To enable improved integration with organizational assessment systems, the 13 Trait dimensions are conceptually mapped to competency dimensions. These competency dimensions may be thought of as compound personality constructs, comprised of two or more individual personality scales (combined as unit-weighted; see Woods & Anderson, 2016). For example, the competency *Problem Solving* (see Figure 3) is derived from the scales *Intellect* (relevant for problem analysis) and *Orderliness* (relevant for developing practical and systematic solutions to problems). The *Competency Insights* report includes detailed explanations of the implications of the Trait assessment in nine competency areas.

Figure 3

An example competency (*Problem Solving*) from the Trait Personality Inventory



The *Trait Leadership Evaluation* report (see Figure 4) presents ten leadership competencies, covering key areas of leader behaviour (managing self, managing teams, managing strategy and change). This report is especially suitable for leadership development, coaching and selection.

An early innovation in the Trait system was to also undertake bespoke or customised assessment design for clients. This typically involves mapping client competencies to the Trait scales, or in some cases reconfiguring the composition and scoring of the dimensions to focus content and attain an optimal fit with client competency models. This is a key advantage of the increasing digital flexibility of psychometric assessment (see Woods, Ahmed, Nikolau, Costa & Anderson, 2020). ABA have provided bespoke forms of the Trait inventory and its outputs for multiple clients and industries.

## Validity studies using Trait: Applied implications

Several validity studies examining the effectiveness of the Trait assessment in organizational settings have been carried out, and ABA continually update validity evidence directly with clients. Further information on the studies briefly mentioned here

can be requested from ABA (see [www.astonassessments.com](http://www.astonassessments.com)). Fundamental aspects of reliability and construct validity were evaluated in a sample of 1273 participants from the UK general working population. These studies confirmed the internal consistency ( $\alpha$  ranging from .76 to .85) and test-retest reliability ( $\alpha$  ranging from .72 to .89) of the 13 scales, and the underlying higher-order five-factor structure.

It is critical that personality assessments for use in organizational settings are evaluated to establish their criterion-related validity. Trait was designed to be applicable across different occupational groups, capturing a range of characteristics that would be more or less relevant in different settings. Reflecting this objective, validity data have been sourced from a range of occupational groups and for general and specific criteria.

In a study of general job performance, a sample of 277 employed participants (54.2% female, 45.8% male; mean age = 38 years) from a variety of occupational groups (36% management and senior; 7% technical; 26% professional; 13% administrative; 9% sales and customer service; 9% other) completed the Trait inventory and had their performance rated by their immediate line manager. Managers rated performance using scales to measure task performance and organizational citizenship behaviour (individual- and organization focused, Williams & Anderson, 1991). A replication study was also conducted in a single-occupation sample of 70 recruitment consultants.

Across these two studies, the Trait dimensions demonstrated significant positive associations with work performance. Focusing on dimensions relating to Conscientiousness and Agreeableness as relevant to these criteria (Barrick & Mount, 1991; Konovsky & Organ, 1996), three Trait dimensions were found to be significantly associated with performance. These were Industriousness (range  $r = .14 - .34$ ), Orderliness (range  $r = .15 - .23$ ), and Cooperation (range  $r = .18 - .27$ ). These findings underline the utility of personality instruments for predicting general aspects of performance across different jobs. In these results, correlations with performance were stronger for the single-occupation group, highlighting that assessments can be especially useful to understand differences in within-occupation or within-team performance.

In the area of leadership, two example studies have examined the association of personality dimensions measured on the Trait inventory with criteria, focusing on both leader emergence and objective performance delivery. To examine leader emergence, 114 employees in a public sector organization, who were not currently appointed to leadership roles, were rated by their managers on their potential for leadership based on rated characteristics and behaviours. These comprised leaderlike characteristics

(e.g., takes charge naturally; has natural leadership potential), team leadership (e.g., brings out the best in people; embraces and promotes equality and diversity; encourages the sharing of views) and strategic leadership (e.g., communicates a compelling view of the future; forward looking and sets goals). A strength of this study was the use of other-rated leadership potential (i.e., not relying on single-source data), which reflects how prospective future leaders or managers might be noticed and identified in an organizational setting.

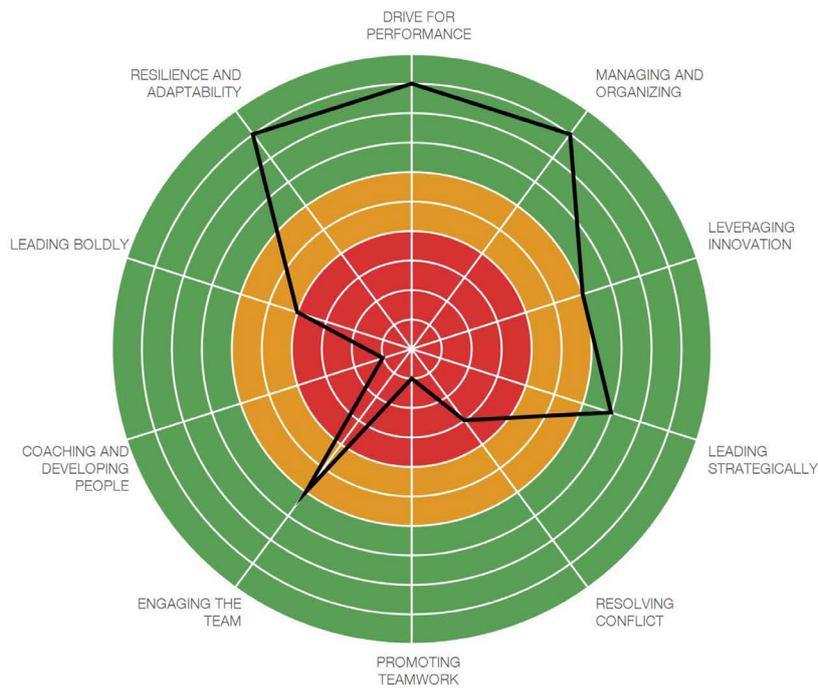
Leaderlike characteristics ratings were positively predicted by the Trait scales Leadership ( $r = .27, p < 0.01$ ), Industriousness ( $r = .27; p < 0.01$ ), Optimism ( $r = .34; p < 0.01$ ) and Stability ( $r = .25; p < 0.05$ ). Team leadership was predicted by Achievement ( $r = .21; p < 0.05$ ) and Stability ( $r = .21; p < 0.05$ ). A notable observation in this study was also the association of Optimism with strategic leadership behaviour ( $r = .27; p < 0.01$ ). These findings could enable practitioners to focus on these kinds of personality traits to help profile future leaders. Such individuals are socially ascendant, committed to work activities, emotionally stable and tolerant of pressure and positive in their approach and outlook.

In a study set in a real-estate agency organization in the UK, 111 business-unit leaders (branch managers) completed the Trait inventory. Their branch (i.e., business unit) performance was then followed up over a two-year period to examine how profitability of the branches were predicted by the managers' personality traits. A combination of traits (e.g., Industriousness, Optimism and interestingly – low Cooperation) were associated with higher objective branch profitability one-year and two-years later. This study highlights the effects that leader personality can have on objective business performance, and cumulatively across a whole organization.

The interesting combination of predictive effects in this study are informative for understanding the role of traits in the sales process. Specifically, income generating activity was predicted effectively by higher scores on the Drive for Results competency, and lower scores on the Working with Others competency. These competencies are pivotal to sales activity and volume, representing motivation to achieve and an assertive, directive sales style. However, as sales volumes increase, so do errors in the sales process (indicated by criteria such as cancellations and compensation). These criteria are negatively predicted by Problem Solving, which appears to act as a buffer on the incidence of errors in the sales process (i.e., better problem-solvers make fewer errors in practice).

Figure 4

Example summary page from the *Trait Leadership Evaluation* showing scores on ten leadership competencies



1. DRIVE FOR PERFORMANCE	9	Leverage and Flex Strength
2. RESILIENCE AND ADAPTABILITY	9	Leverage and Flex Strength
3. LEADING BOLDLY	4	Develop and Improve
4. COACHING AND DEVELOPING PEOPLE	1	Develop and Improve
5. ENGAGING THE TEAM	6	Build and Enhance
6. PROMOTING TEAMWORK	1	Develop and Improve
7. RESOLVING CONFLICT	3	Develop and Improve
8. LEADING STRATEGICALLY	7	Leverage and Flex Strength
9. LEVERAGING INNOVATION	6	Build and Enhance
10. MANAGING AND ORGANIZING	9	Leverage and Flex Strength

In summary, these empirical studies provide indication of the effectiveness and suitability of the Trait assessment for use in selection and development activities with a range of occupational groups. The accumulated findings also give confidence to psychologist practitioners of the validity of assessment in real organizational settings. In all aspects of practice with personality instruments, it is important that they are utilised to support overall consultancy interventions, and not be seen as a method in isolation. This involves practitioners examining focal issues such as selection decisions, performance development, or learning interventions based on evidence from a range of sources (e.g., other selection assessments, performance records). These validity studies offer implications for how personality tools can be integrated into a variety of such activities (for example in general selection and development, leadership succession planning and development, or recruitment in sales).

## Trait in practice with client organizations

An important objective at ABA is for the use of assessment tools to make a positive impact in organizations. Indeed, working through consultancy organizations is an often-overlooked way in which research-oriented psychologists can make an impact. In this respect, ABA has been highlighted as an exemplar (see Hughes, Davis, Robinson & McKay, 2021). The scale of impact of assessment tools depends upon the ways in which they are applied. To illustrate, example client engagements are highlighted, based on two sectors: health and financial services.

In the health sector, Trait has been used to support selection of consultant-level doctors in the UK National Health Service. This example illustrates how assessments can broaden the scope of selection decisions to capture new criteria. The use of Trait in this setting provided clients with a means to explore in a more structured way general competencies around interpersonal interaction, supervision and management that complement the key technical and medical competencies of candidates. The client in this case was seeking to establish a way to assess a broader range of criteria in their selection processes, given that senior doctors have a significant impact on the teams they work in through their interpersonal behaviour as well as technical skill. This recognises that senior doctors have an influence on the culture and climate of teams and organizations as a whole through their work behaviour, and the use of Trait to profile typical behavioural styles helps to ensure that hiring decisions lead to more positive outcomes.

Staying in this sector, Trait has recently been applied in social care settings for the recruitment of front-line carers. This project involved adaptation of the instrument to measure seven key care qualities. The benefit of using the assessment tool in this setting has been multifaceted. For example, the managers conducting the recruitment are able to use output reports to improve their hiring processes, broadening the scope of the areas they assess in interviews, and are building in a new selection method. There are also benefits for candidates. Those completing Trait during the hiring process were found to be more likely to show up for the interview and around 80% reported that they planned to use the applicant feedback received as part of their career development. This is an example of improving applicant engagement in selection through the use of such tools.

In the financial services sector, a multinational client in the South-East Asian region, operating from Malaysia and Singapore, has used the Trait assessment for the past eight years to recruit agency staff and team leaders into their organization. The original engagement with this client was to support an organizational development and change programme, helping managers to recruit people with key traits, promoting the new behaviours that were core to the organization's strategy. This client uses the full Trait inventory and a reduced-item reconfigured version to support different areas of recruitment. It has enabled a standardised approach to recruitment to be adopted across distributed business units and provided opportunities for better engagement with hiring managers and candidates.

Periodic reviews and evaluations of performance data with this client have shown the positive impact of the assessment for the business and have set the foundation for long-term impact and a strong client relationship. It is a collaborative relationship in which mutual and reciprocal exchange of ideas and learning have resulted in a solution that is effective for the client and the culture in which the assessment is applied. This shows how psychologists can bring tools to practice with clients to make an impact in their specific context, by focusing not only on the technical aspects of psychometrics, but also on the practical and contextual factors that determine their effectiveness.

## **Final reflections and conclusions**

This article has introduced the Trait Personality Inventory and reviewed its design and features, relevant validity studies and examples of application with clients. Further information about using Trait is available from the author by request, or on the ABA website.

Trait has been designed to be used in a variety of work settings and set up as a digital assessment with output reports that allow users to apply it in different practitioner activities. Experience of working with clients with the Trait inventory over more than ten years has underlined the versatility and utility of personality tools in practice. A final reflection on this experience is that the applied skills and competencies of practitioners are consistently key to making an impact with psychometric tools – tools make a difference not only as a function of their psychometric design, but through the ways in which they are put into action. The client cases and example studies reviewed here illustrate ways in which the effective use of Trait, or other personality assessments, can make a positive impact in businesses and organizations.

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