

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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