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Industrial-Organizational Psychology in Hong Kong
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Introduction

The development of I-O psychology (or work or occupational psychology as it is otherwise called) in Hong Kong is a relatively recent happening. Not until the past 10 years or so have we begun to have a community of practitioners and academics who communicate and meet regularly, as well as I-O psychology at the postgraduate level offered in at least one of the local universities. This is indeed strange considering that Hong Kong had, until the early 1980s, flourished in manufacturing and industrial production. It has also long been an important financial center. But I-O psychology was literally unheard of as an applied discipline in the 1960s through perhaps the 1980s. In the commercial sector, there were some I-O psychologists around, mostly foreign ones, employed in management consulting firms, and that is about all.

Turning Point

How did the breakthrough come about? Like psychology as a whole, the university has been the cradle of I-O psychology in Hong Kong. In 1997, the year when Hong Kong hit the news headlines with the return of its sovereignty to China, The Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) started its 2-year master's program in I-O psychology, the first ever to be offered locally. Six students were enrolled. Directing it was Kwok Leung who earned his PhD from University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Also teaching in the program were two other Illinois associates, Winton Au and Darius Chan. Why all from Illinois? Perhaps no one is sure, but the important fact is that in the 10 years that have elapsed since, they have among them trained nearly 30 I-O psychologists. Some of these students have since gone on to pursue doctoral degrees.

Profile of HK I-O Psychologists

CUHK is not the only local university with teaching staff with an I-O psychology background. **Anne Marie Francesco** and Randy Chiu teach at Baptist University, although in a Management Department, same as Kwok Leung at the City University of Hong Kong. **Harry Hui** is at Hong Kong University and **Oi Ling Siu** is at Lingnan University; both teach I-O psychology at the undergraduate level.

Compared with I-O psychologists in the academia, I-O practitioners are more varied in terms of the jobs they have. A substantial number are employed as consultants in management consulting firms like PDI and SHL. Quite a few work as internal consultants in either big local firms or multinationals. In most cases, they are employed as human resources professionals rather than psychologists. A few others are self-employed.

Overall, the educational backgrounds of I-O psychologists in Hong Kong span several parts of the world. Not all were trained in the U.S. William Ng and Neil Cowieson, for example,

earned their postgrad degree in occupational psychology in the UK, and Mary Lee studied organizational psychology in Australia.

DIOP

Why and how then were we brought together as a community? In terms of the development of I-O psychology in Hong Kong, an important event happened in the year 2000. The Division of Industrial-Organizational Psychology (DIOP) was formed under the Hong Kong Psychological Society. DIOP was the third division established after the Division of Clinical Psychology and Division of Educational Psychology. It was a late arrival but one that has served the useful function of uniting people with common backgrounds and interests.

DIOP aims to promote the identity, cohesion, and recognition of I-O psychologists in Hong Kong, while presenting I-O psychology to the public, industries, and potential service recipients. Toward these ends, the inaugural chair of DIOP, Mary Lee, a clinical and I-O psychologist who has carried the title of Organizational Psychologist in the Hospital Authority, worked hard with her Executive Council during the initial years to announce the arrival of I-O psychology in Hong Kong. For example, a series of evening gatherings were organized and graced by dignitaries such as Mr. Joseph Wong (then secretary for the Civil Service), Mrs. Pamela Tan (then commissioner for Labor), and Ms. Anna Wu (then chairperson of the Equal Opportunities Commission). DIOP succeeded in making a name for itself, albeit a small one, through efforts like these.

Mary was succeeded by Kwok Leung and then Winton Au. William Ng is its fourth and current chair, and Neil Cowieson will succeed him next year. DIOP now has of over 60 members. About a quarter are academics with the rest being practitioners and a handful of students.

Networking Activities

After the initial round of promotional work, DIOP soon settled into its more regular activities of promoting and sharing professional knowledge among its members and serving as a resource center for networking. Here are some of the things we do on a regular basis.

Mentorship Scheme

First, professional development is advanced through mentorship. Recently, we have established a mentorship scheme to pair up seasoned and junior DIOP member as mentors and mentees. This initiative is intended to promote continuing professional education by providing experience-sharing opportunities for all.

Dinner Talk Gatherings

Dinner talk gatherings are the most common platform for DIOP members to network. These are held about two to three times a year. They are all very casual, and the atmosphere is relaxed and light hearted. Typically 30 to 40 people join the dinner gathering. Some are members, but we also invite non-members such as human resources professionals to introduce them to the field of I-O psychology. We mingle, engage in small talk, exchange job information, and enjoy some delicious food. The highlight of the evening, the talk, is given by either an academic or a practitioner, local or from overseas, on an I-O psychology or related topic of common interest. Over the years, some talks have been delivered by local academics such as Harry Hui of The University of Hong Kong and Kwok Leung, who is now at the City University

of Hong Kong. Other talks have been given by practitioners including Neil Cowieson who runs his own company called Human Scope, and **Paul VanKatwyk** at PDI. Quite a few overseas visitors have served as guest speakers as well. The more recent ones include Meredith Belbin, the team roles specialist, **Miriam Erez** from Technion–Israel Institute of Technology, **Wayne Cascio** from the University of Colorado, and **Don Campbell** from the United States Military Academy.

Interest Group Meetings

Evening interest group meetings are also very popular among members and friends of DIOP. Usually we have 10 to 20 people coming to a venue voluntarily offered by a member (e.g., a conference room in an office in city center). We deliberately limit attendance to a small size to ensure in-depth discussion during this one-and-a-half hour meeting. On many occasions we regret, though probably privately taking pride, having to turn away a few members due to oversubscription. No food is provided. Sometimes we manage to have free drinks if we have a benevolent host. But this does not matter at all as members bury themselves in discussion and debate. Each meeting carries a different theme. Pre-meeting readings and prepared handouts are given. Some examples of what we have discussed include “Recruitment & Turnover,” “Coaching” and “Managing Change.” The enthusiasm that is witnessed in these discussion meetings can probably be explained by the right mix of practitioners and academics among the participants, each presenting their different perspectives and challenging the other side. The meetings are very exciting. Indeed, the heat that is generated during these discussions is warm enough to help us, on a winter meeting, brave the strong north wind when we leave in the darkness of the evening with empty stomachs.

Networking With the International and Chinese Counterparts

Throughout the years, there has been no lack of overseas I-O psychologists visiting Hong Kong. Most often they come as visiting scholars and are attached to a university for a few months. We welcome them to our dinner gatherings and interest group meetings. Sometimes, special sessions are also held to introduce them and their research work, for which they are famous. They are our window on the world. We would also like to make a note that any I-O psychologist planning to come for either a holiday or on sabbatical are most welcome to contact us.

With Hong Kong being so near to mainland China, and having come under it since 1997, we naturally want to have close links with our compatriot counterparts. However, I-O psychology appears to be still a budding field in China and exchange visits with them have not occurred as often as desired. Nevertheless, we had Kan Shi at the Institute of Psychology, the Chinese Academy of Science, at one of our gatherings, and all those present were impressed by his work on the stress effect of SARS on health professionals. Among our members, Oi Ling Siu has also been invited to give talks in Beijing.

Advancing Professional Knowledge

DIOP Newsletter

DIOP circulates an e-newsletter among members, though admittedly, we have not been publishing it as frequently and regularly as we wish due to a shortage of manpower resources. Nonetheless, it is another channel whereby

members can receive the most updated information about DIOP affairs and development. For example, in our most recent issue, we have included interviews with new members, a summary of a “Change Management” interest group meeting, reflections on the I-O psychology conferences in Australia that some of our members have attended, and a discussion (more truly a regret) on the lack of local data and statistics on I-O psychology-related issues.

Informal Review of I-O psychology and HR Literature

Since 2005, we have also been publishing an *Incomplete (or informal) Review on the Advances of I-O Psychology* on a quarterly basis. There is no lack of review of books and serious journal articles on I-O psychology or related issues. However, coverage of less formal articles such as those published in popular management or general magazines like *The Economist* and *Fortune* is rare. Sometimes, one can find gems in these magazines, which may be very revealing. The incomplete or informal review is an attempt to capture some of these highly readable pieces. Feedback from members, especially practitioners, is that these reviews are an informative source to keep them updated on trends, current thoughts, and research findings.

Conference Presentations

Being a part of the Hong Kong Psychological Society, DIOP members have actively participated in and presented papers on different themes during symposiums at the annual conference of the HKPS. In 2000, we focused on “Changes, Work Stress and Work Behavior” and “Contemporary Issues at the Workplace.” In 2004, we delved into “Promoting Psychological Well-Being at Work.” The year following, 2005, the theme was “Assessment—Valid Tool to Identify and Develop Your Talent.” Last year, the spotlight was on “Strategically Leveraging Coaching for Senior Leadership” and “Transformational Coaching.” The theme this year, “Talent Management,” reflects the current condition in Hong Kong where employers are trying their utmost to vie for and keep productive workers.

Impact on the Community

Not only do we hope to contribute academically, we have also been trying to promote I-O psychology to the community. For 2 years, DIOP members contributed to a column in the *Hong Kong Economic Journal*, arguably one of the most influential local newspapers among intellectuals, under the column “Psychology at Work.” We have written more than 100 articles, covering a wide range of work-related issues from a psychological perspective. These articles can be accessed on <http://www.hkps.org.hk/diop>. We almost forgot to mention that they are written in Chinese. Some members have delivered talks to public and private bodies such as HSBC, Institute of Human Resource Management, Labor Department, and Occupational Safety & Health Council. We also organized a forum on the role of the business sector during the period of coping with SARS.

In addition, DIOP has engaged in some local research on the Hong Kong working population. Last year we conducted a phone survey of 500 full-time employers to examine the state of overtime work in Hong Kong. The results were presented in a press conference attracting the attention of both the print and electronic media. Studies on work stress and counterproductive behaviors among Hong Kong employees have also been conducted. We believe the surveys have provided the public insights on the current work life of employees. Perhaps they have also helped to raise the profile of DIOP in the Hong Kong community.

Reflections on the Tenth Anniversary of DIOP and Looking Forward

Looking back at what we have achieved during the past 10 years, feelings are mixed. The division has grown in membership. We have a really nice community of I-O psychologists who value and enjoy the company of one another. We have also made our presence felt, at least in some quarters. But perhaps collectively, more could have been done especially given that Hong Kong is potentially such a rich ground for the application of I-O psychology. What has prevented this from happening?

Size matters. We are a small community compared with other professional associations, and not all members can find the time to join our activities or contribute to the newsletter. In a society where people easily work more than 12 hours a day and 6 days a week, where it is not uncommon for internal work meetings to start at 10 p.m., this is understandable.

The lack of local data about work and people at work is another limiting factor. Many important work statistics are not kept by the Labor Department or Census and Statistics Department. Without data, it is not possible for I-O psychologists to comment meaningfully on the state of work or to provide work-policy input to government or the legislature.

Looking forward, important opportunities exist. In many industrialized or highly developed countries, the world of work is changing. So are organizations in their design, structure, and communication channels as well as their contract, both formal and psychological, with employees. Hong Kong is no exception. Hong Kong is, in fact, experiencing even more change than that. The change of sovereignty, coupled with other macro trends like globalization has triggered many social-, political-, and public-sector transformations of no small dimension. In this state of rapid changes, many people are thrown out of balance. Some opt for early retirement. Those who cannot afford to do so struggle along. Stress at work, and outside of work too, is nothing but high.

I-O psychology is about helping workers to be more productive. It is about helping people at work to adapt to and find satisfaction in work. It is about helping employers and workers come to some common understanding and mutual acceptance. It is about making the world of work a better place to be, against other harsher aspects of life. If that is so, then we believe Hong Kong now needs I-O psychologists more than ever before. It is a calling whose time has come. We and our members sincerely believe that we have a mission to fulfill. We, using our professional knowledge, skills, and systematic and objective ways of inquiry, should be able to help shed light here and there, to point to possibilities and hope, and to make things happen.

If we are invited to write again on I-O psychology in Hong Kong in another 5 years, we certainly will have more to report.

Reference

Out with the old on clean desk day. (2004, January 13). *Chicago Sun-Times*, p. 8.