INTERVIEW PROF. DR. ROBERT A. ROE

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In this newsletter edition we had the opportunity to interview Dr. Robert A. Roe, professor emeritus of organizational theory and organizational behaviour at the Universiteit Maastricht.

He was full professor in Work and Organizational Psychology at Delft University of Technology and W&O Psychology at Tilburg University, and part-time professor in Organizational Psychology at the University of Nijmegen (2002). He was general director of the Netherlands Aeromedical Institute in Soesterberg, the Netherlands.

Roe is the founding-president of the European Association of Work & Organizational Psychology (EAWOP) and the founding-director of the Work & Organization Research Center in Tilburg (WORC). He played an active role in the European Network of Organizational and Work Psychologists (ENOP) especially with regard to the development of the European Reference Model and Minimum Standards for Work and Organizational Psychology.

He was recently involved in the development of EuroPsy, the European Diploma for Psychologists and he is currently chairman of the Scientific Advisory Board of SHL International.

Over the years Robert Roe has written more than 300 scientific and professional publications, including several books. He has also served on the editorial boards of various scientific journals, currently including 'Applied Psychology – An International Review', the 'Journal of Organizational Behaviour' (USA), and the 'European Journal of W&O Psychology' (Europe).

Some of the main topics that where discuss in the interview refer to the main challenges that organizations face nowadays regarding to the WOP context and how WOP-P contribute to face this challenges, the competences a WOP psychologist have to have in order to contribute in changing organizational contexts and the advantages and challenges that WOP psychologists have to face when working as consultants.

1. *What is your view about the main changes and new challenges that organizations face nowadays regarding WOP context?*

This question cannot be answered without adopting some time frame, as to contrast "nowadays" with what was there before, the "past". Let me therefore suggest a time frame of several decades, up to half a century. Furthermore, I think it is helpful to focus on "organizational phenomena' rather than on "organizations" per se. I believe that organizational phenomena have changed in the sense that collaboration of people is now possible in many more forms than before. The most obvious changes relate to place and time: two of the most defining characteristics of organizations in the past, namely co-location and synchrony, are no longer required. Primarily due to current information and communication technologies, people can now do "virtual work", that is, collaborate while being at different places and making their contributions at different time moments. This has far-reaching implications for organizational phenomena and for our

very understanding of "organizations". For instance, it dissolves organizational boundaries and redefines the relationship between people and "the organization". Today, people can be part of multiple organizations at the same time. The classical idea of "people in organizations" has given way to a reality in which "organizations are in people". What organizations effectively are, depends to a large degree on peoples' identification with and dedication to the various entities of collaboration, thus inherently psychological phenomena. Organizations are no longer bounded entities with human resources inside, but rather changing patterns of human relations.

The changing nature of what we call "organization" has many other aspects. For instance, with evolving economic, demographic, and political trends, we see slow changes in the forces that people exert on each other, that is, how managers, leaders and employees influence each other, what binds them together, and where the limits of cohesion lie. The time of employees just being "human resources" and of managers deliberately reshaping structures and cultures lies behind us. It has become increasingly clear that actual changes of companies and public bodies differ in significant ways from changes planned by managers – again a phenomenon with a psychological dimension.

The third major change I see is the change in ownership of organizations, particularly in larger corporations that span one or more continents on the globe. During the last three decades we have seen an increasing impact of anonymous and influential stockowners on how organizations are (legally) defined, structured and managed. Here we find a psychological "disconnect" between ownership and membership of the organization that leads to continuous tensions around who will fulfill the positions of managers, leaders and workers, what they are expected to do, and what they should do next. As such corporations are typically international, the interplay between the various national groups within the heterogeneous workforce are very complex indeed. This stands in stark contrast with how small and medium sized companies operate, where stakeholders know each other and organic ways of functioning still prevail.

These changes are rather fundamental – they relate to how "organizational phenomena" have changed and how what we call "organizations" today differs form what we used to call "organizations" decades ago. Of course, we could also adopt a more traditional perspective and consider what has happened to particular organizations, such as Fiat or Telefonica. In this case a more conventional list of changes can be made, e.g. changes in markets, products, process, structures, technologies, technology, workforce composition (including gender, ethnic, religious heterogeneity) etc. Although the previously mentioned aspects are present in the background, the dominant image is that of an organization placed in a dynamic environment from which many changes emerge that must be accommodated in order for the organization to survive. Accommodating such changes has psychological aspects that are more obvious and more familiar. They translate into a need for organizational design and organizational change, the whole gamut of HRM activities, design of work places, equipment and procedures, and of course management consulting, leadership training, coaching etc.

2. *How can WOP psychologists contribute to face these new challenges?*

I see different roles for WOP psychologists. The most obvious contributions are those relating to social problems that emerge in any organization, simply because the interaction of people in teams and larger entities, the arrival of newcomers, the

promotion of some, and the departure of others, creates typical problems that need to be addressed. Think of ingroup-outgroup differentiation, miscommunication, conflict, bullying, abuse, and so on. But next to this, contributions are needed in the traditional domains of organizational, personnel and work psychology that relate to the topics hinted at above, that is, organizational design, organizational change, recruitment, selection, training, job design etc. Particularly important are assessments and interventions relating to the many pressures that people experience because of the need for organizational change, and planned organizational changes as such.

Yet, I believe that next to all this WOP psychologists need to reflect on the more fundamental changes in organizational phenomena, and with the help of research develop a better understanding of what organizations are today. I see a need to develop new concepts and new approaches that allow people involved in organizations to get a better insight in their roles, the contexts in which they operate, and how these affect and are affected by their own lives.

3. *You are one of the responsible persons who are involved in developing the European qualification standard for psychologists. What do you think is especially important (which competencies) for a WOP psychologist, in order to contribute the most in changing organizational contexts?*

EuroPsy is meant to raise the qualification of psychologists to a minimum level and to guarantee a certain level of competence to the outside world. The Specialist EuroPsy for W&O psychology has the same function for those who specialize in this field. I think that the twenty professional competences and eight enabling competences are relevant and important for all psychologists, at the basic level of the profession and in the respective specializations. I would hesitate to call specific competences more important because particular changes in organizations have become more salient in recent times. First of all, the EuroPsy standard is generic, and psychologists must be able to deal with a broad range of issues in organizations – whether they are large or small, hi-tech or human-touch. Secondly, the changes I have spoken about above are relatively slow – they have unfolded in decades. And similar changes will undoubtedly follow in the decades to come. Psychologists should adjust to these changes by updating their knowledge, skills, attitudes and competences in the course of their career. I believe that the proper context for this is what EuroPsy calls 'Continuous Professional development', rather than a one-time update of the average competence profile.

4. *You have a rich experience in consulting activities involving many firms and public organizations. Which are the advantages and challenges that WOP psychologists have to face when working as consultants?*

Whatever look one takes at organizations – whether legal, economic, technical, or managerial – the human factor always plays a critical role. How organizations function, whether they are effective, how they deal with change etc. depends to a large degree on how people think, feel and act. WOP psychologists are in a privileged position to advice organizations because of their deeper understanding of people, and particularly because they are able to see the human aspects of all actors – whether they are managers, leaders or "ordinary employees". In addition, they have a broad arsenal of theories and models, as well as methods of assessment and intervention that have been developed for use in organizational settings. This makes them well prepared for a role as consultant.

However, WOP psychologists should be aware that there are more aspects to organizations than the psychological ones. Legal, economic, technical aspects are important as well – and psychologists must be ready to gain some knowledge about these aspects. Perhaps even more important is that WOP psychologists are aware of the historical and societal context in which organizations have emerged and in which they themselves live. They should be able to detach themselves from conventional concepts of organizations as given entities, managerial views of organizational change and resistance, and employees as human resources, and be able to reflect on organizational phenomena as they develop over time. This will help them to perceive even more dimensions of human behavior and to enhance the value of what they have to offer.