

To Live and Tell the Life We've Lived

Commencement Speech for the XVII Edition of the Master in Work, Organizational and Personnel Psychology

Dear Professors, Representatives of the Faculty of Psychology, IDOCAL Institute, Director of the Department of Social Psychology, University Staff, family and friends, to everyone watching this, and of course, my dear WOP-Pies: a good afternoon to you all.

It is an honor to speak on behalf of some of the most brilliant people I've met in my career.

People who, over the past two years, have called multiple countries home, lived different lives, and who can now explain what "Work, Organizational and Personnel Psychology" is when our families ask us. Hopefully.

People who, over the past two years, decided to be my friends, some became my family, and all of whom taught me many things about life.

Funny enough, this is technically the second time I'm giving this speech. A few days ago, while writing it on a train from Madrid, I ran it through with three strangers from the south of United States, who are about my age and happened to be sitting nearby. We shared stories and took the opportunity to ask for their feedback - because why not? Feedback is a gift.

Turns out, they were a bunch of lawyers, which explains why most of the feedback was focused on the sentence structure and logical flow of the speech.

But, anyway, that spontaneous moment captured exactly what I wanted to speak about today: Novelty, Complexity, and Perspective. The three dimensions of what makes a psychologically rich life.

So allow me to take you on a short journey, a bit like a train ride we're all used to, through these three dimensions. Together, I believe they describe the life we've lived these past two years.

Let me begin properly - with a question.

Raise your hand if, at some point in your childhood, you were asked this familiar question: "What do you want to be when you grow up?"

We're told this question is innocent. Harmless. But I would argue otherwise.

First, it tells us that work is everything. That our worth lies in job titles. That adulthood is defined not by growth, curiosity, or kindness.

Second, there's identity foreclosure. In psychology, that's what happens when we commit to a life path without exploring alternatives. What if, along the way, we figure out something that is more aligned with our interest?

Third, it implies that life is linear. That we pick a destination, walk a straight line toward it, and voilà – we live a good life.

But as we know through life lessons - both kind and unkind – that life is not linear.

Life has its ups and downs, twists and turns, and many surprises.

Like waking up to your WhatsApp before a big presentation at 9 a.m after Doroteja bombarded the group with a thousand questions.

Or spiraling into an existential crisis at 2 a.m. over SOAREA for the 3rd time around.

Sometimes, it all felt unreal. Like we were living in a simulation. Like our Winter School era. And just a week later, you're packing your bags for a country you never imagined yourself living in.

Like all of a sudden we see stories of Anastasija living her Canadian girl era in her IG stories.

What I'm trying to say is: we can plan and plot all we want, but life has a way of surprising us anyway.

Many events shape our lives and careers. But sometimes, it's the small conversations at the end of the day - or over a cup of coffee - that change everything.

For me, it was a Sunday afternoon when a friend asked me this question: "If you could do one crazy thing in your 20s, what would you do?"

I said: Move. As far as I can. Live in different countries. Get a master's degree. Meet people from all over the world.

That quiet Sunday question turned into a life-altering decision - one that led me to our master's program and the Erasmus+ Scholarship.

And in 2023, I took the bold step to move to the EU leaving my career in the Philippines, and carrying my life in three suitcases and documents bearing my hopes for a new life: acceptance forms, scholarship letters, and a thousand dreams pressed between these pieces of paper.

As someone from a developing country, being awarded a full-ride scholarship to study abroad felt like being invited through the front door that is often closed to people like us.

I didn't sneak in. I didn't have to push my way through. I was welcomed - with a seat at the table. And that is a privilege I carry with humility.

I left behind the comfort of familiarity, my family, and a version of myself who wasn't sure if he belonged here.

And I won't lie: there were moments I felt lost. Overwhelmed. Almost about to crumble.

I'm sure many of us did - especially those who left home behind, and haven't seen their families in what feels like forever.

But in my most honest moments, I know this: the past two years have been nothing short of a gift.

Not just for the gift of living in a beautiful city in Spain, or the amazing things we got to do -

but for who we became in the process, the friendships we built along the way - connections we never would've made otherwise.

Some even welcomed me to their family - like Jana in Germany.

We lived a psychologically rich life.

In psychology, we often hear about two kinds of good lives: the happy life and the meaningful life.

A happy life is marked by comfort, stability, and lots of positive emotions. Were we happy these past two years? Debatable.

We were uprooted. We became strangers in unfamiliar cities. We navigated visa chaos, housing searches every six months, and Aula Virtual submissions at 11:59 p.m.

Our lives weren't stable - but we were alive. Full of life and alive.

A meaningful life is guided by purpose. Some of us found it. Some of us are still looking. And that's okay - as the title of my favorite podcast goes: it's a life in progress.

But psychologist Shigehiro Oishi suggests a third path: the psychologically rich life.

One not necessarily defined by joy or purpose, but by richness - in novelty, in complexity, and in perspective change.

And that's exactly what these past two years gave us.

We found novelty in new countries and new ways of living.

Many of us learned new languages. Some of you even became fluent, like Scott, Miljana, and Maria.

We embraced complexity, inside the classroom when making sense of theories and designing interventions, writing our thesis, or while applying for internships. Let's be honest - at some point you just stare at your screen and ask yourself "is this even worth it?". It was complex, intense, a lot of breathing in and breathing out to cope. But we made it.

And we saw our perspectives shift.

Being immersed in different cultures and ways of thinking challenged what we thought we knew - about others, about work, about ourselves. And in the process we got to know who we are. And who we are not.

We let go of assumptions. We became more curious, more compassionate, more open.

We lived a psychologically rich life.

And as we reflect on what makes life rich, we cannot ignore how much of it is spent at work.

Now let me go back to my first question. We're asked in childhood what we want to be when we grow up - perhaps because we'll spend a quarter of our lives at work.

For many, it may be even more - not out of ambition, but because of unjust political, economic, and social systems that force people to work simply to survive.

My parents are no stranger to this reality. They worked seven days a week with barely any rest. They didn't have the privilege of even completing their education, but they held an unshakable belief in the power of education.

So much of their lives were spent struggling - so that we could strive. So I grew up listening to the music of struggling and striving.

From an early age, I understood: if I wanted to rise above the life I was born into, I had to work.

Work put food on the table. It kept a roof over our heads.

But it gave me something else too: a chance to grow.

It led me to great mentors who took a chance to develop me and whose leadership helped me become not just a better professional, but a better human being.

It opened doors and gave me the opportunity to move across borders, to pursue this very degree.

And today, I stand before you as the first in my family to earn a master's degree.

To study abroad. The first to work for global organizations that took me to places.

Work is not everything - but it did pave the way for everything I have now, and most importantly, the person I've become.

So maybe the question "What do you want to be when you grow up?" was never really about a job title. Maybe it was always about the kind of person we hope to become.

To be as kind and good hearted as Sangmi. Or to be as graceful as Wiki. Or to be as thoughtful as Chara. Or to be a loving, good friend like Beste.

And before I end, allow me to honor two people who taught me the value of hard work - my parents.

Ma, Pa.

You worked tirelessly for us.

You gave up your rest so we could chase our dreams.

You didn't have the chance to finish your education, but you made sure we could.

You stayed up at night wondering how to feed us, how to pay for our school.

And in all of that, you gave me something more valuable than comfort: you gave me discipline. The discipline that carried me forward, that got me far in life.

Thank you for letting me dream big, even when it meant flying far from home.

Thank you for letting me spread my wings, even when it meant watching me go.

You are my greatest inspiration in all that I do. Thank you for all that you do and you are.

A Parting Invitation to My Fellow WOP-Pies

And just as we've embraced novelty, complexity, and new perspectives over the past two years, I leave you with three invitations for our lives ahead:

1. Honor the richness of what we've lived.

Let's not rush to label the past two years as "challenging" or "fun" or "stressful."

Let it be all of that. Let it be messy, layered, and worth remembering. Let it be human.

2. Welcome complexity to enrich our lives.

It's messy. Frustrating. Confusing. But it's also where the best learning happens.

Sit with it. Learn from it. Welcome it.

3. Stay open to the beauty of the unfamiliar.

Keep being curious. Keep meeting people who think differently. Every perspective is a gift.

If I've learned anything these past two years, it's this:

Life is richer when it's shared.

So thank you - each of you - for sharing yours with me.

For making these past two years more than just a chapter in a degree, but a chapter in a life well-lived. Long live the stories we'll tell - about ourselves, and about each other.

They may not always be happy. They may not always feel meaningful. But they are: Layered. Transformative. And psychologically rich.

Cheers, and congratulations to all of us - the WOP-P Class of 2025.

To God be all the glory.