Occupational Health Psychology:
I-O Psychologists Meet with Interdisciplinary
Colleagues to Discuss This Emerging Field

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Twenty-six educators, researchers, and practitioners (about half of whom were I-O psychologists) gathered on the campus of the University of South Florida in early December to discuss the emerging field of occupational health psychology (OHP). This interdisciplinary field, defined by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) as “the application of psychology to improving the quality of worklife and to protecting and promoting the safety, health, and well-being of workers” combines I-O psychology with health-related psychology areas (e.g., clinical and counseling) and other disciplines. The stakeholders from multiple disciplines in the United States were joined by Eusebio Rial-Gonzalez (European Academy of Occupational Health Psychology) and Takashi Haratani (Japanese Society of Mental Health) to discuss common goals and initiatives in OHP. Of particular interest was discussion of OHP training, which today exists as part of I-O, clinical, and counseling psychology graduate programs and other disciplines in the U.S. at a handful of universities.

There was considerable agreement among the stakeholders at this workshop that the field of psychology possesses the requisite expertise in work organization, occupational stress, health, and mental health that the more generic occupational safety and health field has been lacking. I-O psychologists are poised to play a major role in OHP, as many, whether they realize it or not, already have been engaged in both OHP practice, research, and training through their work in employee well-being, occupational stress and workplace safety. I-O psychologists have skills directly relevant to OHP, including employee assessment, job design, organization development, and training. Psychologists in other areas bring additional critical skills as well. Counseling psychologist Jo-Ida Hansen (University of Minnesota) observed during the meeting that the work of OHP psychologists is a natural
extension of the historical emphasis of counseling psychology on career development, assessment, problem solving for normal development issues, vocational psychology, and therapeutic interventions. Health psychology and clinical psychology have also provided expertise on stress, health, and mental health. However, as NIOSH researcher Joseph Hurrell pointed out during a workshop presentation on the public health perspective of OHP, there remains a large disconnect between these fields of psychology and general occupational health. He added, “Psychologists need to make the relevance of OHP clear to the field of occupational medicine by focusing on outcomes of public health significance.”

This gap between occupational health and behavioral science has been acknowledged repeatedly by authorities as a subject of concern. In a formal attempt by the psychology community to bring the expertise and resources of psychologists to the occupational safety and health field, NIOSH and APA launched a series of initiatives between 1990 and 1999 to promote the new area of OHP. Four international conferences on work, stress, and health were convened; the Journal of Occupational Health Psychology was founded; NIOSH, together with labor and industry stakeholders, placed the topic of work organization among its highest research priorities; a program to fund postdoctoral training in OHP at major universities was implemented and eventually superseded by the funding of graduate training in psychology to prepare psychologists to understand and influence factors affecting occupational safety and health.

Graduate Level Training in OHP

Eleven universities from around the country have received funds from a cooperative agreement between APA and NIOSH to develop graduate level training in OHP, and in most cases these efforts are in part outgrowths of existing I-O and other psychology programs. Universities funded from 1998–2001 were Bowling Green State University, Kansas State University, University of Minnesota, Clemson University, Tulane University, University of Houston, Portland State University, University of California–Los Angeles, Colorado State University, University of South Florida, and University of Texas at Austin.

Over the past 4 years, the faculty at these institutions have worked intensively to shape multidisciplinary curricula in work organization, stress, and health for training students in psychology and other related fields. Descrip-
tions of their programs can be viewed on the OHP Web site at www.cdc.gov/niosh/ohp.html. The December workshop in Tampa provided an appropriate forum for the faculty to share their experiences with one another and formalize the future of education and training in OHP.

OHP Workshop Highlights and Action Steps

Facilitated discussions during the workshop centered around five major themes: (a) building an external demand for occupational health psychologists; (b) research needs and funding resources; (c) candidates and qualifications of students; (d) essential training curricula; and (e) resources and materials for training purposes.

One of the key issues raised centered on the topic of practice opportunities in the field of OHP. “Opportunities for occupational health psychologists are as varied as the curricula,” said Stacey Moran, an I-O psychologist with St. Paul Fire and Marine Insurance. “There is not a single company that would not benefit from someone with this particular training. However, it is difficult to pinpoint exactly what an occupational health psychologist is because they are skilled in so many areas.”

Another serious topic of discussion addressed the difficulty in getting research conducted on workplace well-being funded, particularly by the National Institutes in the United States. Paul Spector commented that the review panels of many of the National Institutes do not consider workplace research to be “science.” Applied research is funded to a much greater extent by government funding agencies in other countries.

A number of action steps related to the five discussion topics emerged from the points raised during the weekend meeting:

• Appoint a working group of psychologists to define the knowledge, skills, and abilities most in demand to fulfill business needs in occupational safety and health.
• Take proactive steps to increase the number of OHP stakeholders appointed to editorial review panels of journals, grants, and other research outlets.
• Partner with other disciplines in occupational safety and health to plan research projects and submit proposals to funding agencies.
• Recruit undergraduate and graduate students from multiple disciplines to complete the curricula in OHP.
• Develop continuing education courses on OHP topics to facilitate the cross-training of
psychologists already licensed to practice in their states.

- Appoint a working group of current university faculty to review OHP course offerings and develop a subset of competencies that students should have.
- Develop OHP courses that are specifically aimed at nonpsychologists.
- Compile a master list of suggested readings, textbooks, Web sites, and databases that are accessible to OHP training programs to ensure adequate coverage of topics considered important for the curricula.

The meeting concluded with the appointment of small working groups to tackle the proposed plan of action. APA and NIOSH hope that another meeting can be organized during summer 2002 to continue plans to formalize the discipline. These meetings will further the efforts of psychologists to gain recognition for OHP within the field of psychology and increase visibility in other areas of occupational safety and health.

Note: For more information on occupational health psychology, visit the OHP Web site at www.cdc.gov/niosh/ohp.html.