

## NEOLIBERAL FANTASIES

### Our neoliberal fantasies?

#### A preliminary test of research trends in leading journals in Work and Organizational Psychology

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**Abstract**

Prior to engaging in a substantive discussion on the supposed influence of neoliberalism on research in Work and Organizational Psychology (WOP), it is important to verify the empirical basis of the trends advanced by Bal and Doci (2018). To this end, we content analyzed 745 abstracts of empirical studies published in leading WOP journals during the years 2006-2007 and 2016-2017. Results of our content analysis do not support the hypothesized trends towards more instrumentality and individualism in WOP research, suggesting that Bal and Doci's (2018) portrayal of the WOP literature does not provide a solid basis for discussion. On the basis of our findings, we conclude with recommendations to broaden the scope of WOP research to also include macrolevel, societal issues.

## Our Neoliberal Fantasies?

### A preliminary test of research trends in leading journals in Work and Organizational Psychology

In their position paper, Bal and Dóci (2018) paint a discomfoting picture of the state of the field of Work and Organizational Psychology (WOP). It is argued that over the years, in an implicit and hidden manner, a neoliberal ideology has pervaded WOP as a scientific discipline. This dominant ideology is claimed to have affected research practices and choices, resulting for instance in an increasing focus on how individuals can contribute to organizational performance and a growing emphasis on individual responsibility. We welcome critical perspectives on WOP, as we believe that challenging our basic assumptions might help us in making scientific progress as a discipline. However, we need to ensure that the portrayal of our discipline, as a basis for further discussion, is accurate and comprehensive. When seeking to identify broad trends in the literature, there is a risk of cherry-picking observations to fit the larger narrative or oversampling findings conveniently close to the authors' own research experience.

To address this issue, we aim to provide a preliminary examination of some of the trends identified by Bal and Dóci (2018), treating them as testable hypotheses when possible. We adapted a content analysis approach developed by Aguinis and Cascio (2008) to identify the relative attention devoted to various topical areas in the field of WOP. More specifically, we content analyzed all abstracts of empirical studies published during the years 2006-2007 and 2016-2017 in *Journal of Applied Psychology (JAP)*, *Personnel Psychology (PPsych)*, *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology (EJWOP)* and *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology (JOOP)*. *JAP* and *PPsych* are generally seen as the two leading U.S. journals in the WOP domain (Zickar & Highhouse, 2001). As WOP

research in Europe has historically emphasized different themes, we also included two leading European WOP journals. We sampled two time periods to examine trends over time. Given that Bal and Dóci (2018) set up the onset of the global economic crisis in 2007 as a neoliberal cataclysmic event, we chose the two years prior to the crisis and ten years later as points of comparison. Out of the 874 articles, we only selected the empirical studies, resulting in 745 abstracts which were coded by three independent, trained raters. For reasons of brevity, a detailed overview of coding rules are available from the authors.

Our method might seem inconsistent with Bal and Dóci's (2018) claim that positivism already involves a neoliberal claim to truth. They also argue that the effect of neoliberal ideology "is often difficult to assess... and rather implicit and hidden" (p. 9). In the philosophy of science, such arguments are typically identified as immunization and epistemic defense mechanisms (Boudry & Braeckman, 2011) to ultimately protect a theory from falsification. Here, our position is that a theory can only be regarded as scientific to the extent that it is open to empirical refutation. Therefore, we tried to empirically falsify a few of the trends described in their narrative. We must acknowledge however that given the short time frame and space available, the current analysis provides only a very first preliminary test and a more in-depth, systematic analysis is needed.

### **Instrumentality**

WOP research has been depicted by Bal and Doci (2018) as only taking interest in human experiences in so far that these can be mobilized for organizational performance. Given the applied focus of WOP it would be hard to deny that the discipline has an interest in contributing to organizational performance. Indeed, from its very origins, "the psychological experiment is systematically placed at the service of commerce and industry" (Münsterberg, 1913, p. 3). Using Bal and Doci's (2018) terminology, one could thus say that the roots of WOP convey a neoliberal point of view, except that the term neoliberalism was only coined in

1938. A visible illustration, according to Bal and Dóci (2018), of how the relationship between employees and organizations is exclusively seen as an instrumental exchange of resources is the popularity of social exchange theory in WOP. A further symptom of the instrumentality logic is that employee experiences are not acknowledged as relevant outcomes if they are not linked to organizationally relevant outcomes, making such research particularly hard to publish.

To examine these trends, we explored the number of studies that focused exclusively on performance, well-being or both (see Table 1). We observed a slight decline over time in studies focusing on performance as a dependent variable (63.6% to 59.2%). Studies exclusively focusing on well-being as a dependent variable have remained relatively stable (24.7% and 26.8%) and are more prevalent in European journals (35.6% and 33.5%) than in U.S. journals (20.3% and 20.9%). Studies examining the 'harmonious' relationship (or empirically modeling relationships focused on both well-being and performance) have been less prevalent in U.S. journals (10.5% and 12.6%) than in European journals (14.4% and 15.6%). Thus, over the years, a large part of the studies has focused on performance outcomes but also a substantial part on well-being outcomes. Only a minor part of studies has looked at them in tandem. In general, the pattern arising from our preliminary analysis is stable for both the U.S.  $\chi^2 (2, N = 462) = .56, p = .76$  and Europe  $\chi^2 (2, N = 283) = .16, p = .93$ . Claims about an (1) increasing focus on performance, (2) difficulties of publishing 'soft' outcomes, or (3) pursuing the fantasy of the harmonious relationship are not supported. We also examined the prevalence of social exchange theory, given Bal and Dóci's (2018) claim that "WOP researchers have persisted in using social exchange theory being able to explain almost any action in the workplace" (p. 28). Social exchange theory was mentioned 17 times, or in 2.2% of all studies.

### **Individualism**

Given its roots in psychology, the focus of WOP on the individual is not surprising. It is difficult to claim that neoliberal ideology is responsible for an increasing focus on the individual if the individual is the essential unit of study in psychology. Criticism about how WOP has not sufficiently accounted for structural, societal conditions is a bit akin to saying that sociology has largely overlooked individual differences. However, with the advent of multi-level theory, it would be interesting to see to what extent the focus has shifted from individuals towards team, organization and societal issues. We also sought to test claims about a shift towards individual responsibility. One way to shed light on such a trend is examining if research has focused more on individual versus situational explanations of work phenomena. First, as can be seen in Table 1, overall a stable number of studies exclusively focused on individual-level processes (89.4% and 87.5%)  $\chi^2(1, N = 745) = .67, p = .41$ . In terms of individual versus situational explanations of phenomena, exclusively focusing on individual predictors (32.2% to 20%) or situational predictors (26.7% to 19.7%) has decreased over time. Studies taking both individual and situational predictors into account have increased (41.1% to 60.3%)  $\chi^2(2, N = 745) = 27.97, p < .01$ . Overall, we can conclude that WOP indeed predominantly focuses on individual issues, although there has not been a further increase as suggested by Bal and Dóci (2018). The suggested trend towards individual explanations is not apparent in the data. We also explored whether the literature is reflective of a so-called "fantasy of social engineering". As shown in Table 1, we saw an increase in the number of intervention studies (12.8% to 19.2%)  $\chi^2(1, N = 745) = 5.72, p = .02$ , which still seems a relatively low level.

### Conclusion

Most of the trends inferred from Bal and Dóci's (2018) narrative did not emerge from our analysis, suggesting that their portrayal of the WOP literature does not provide a solid basis for discussion. On the basis of our findings, we see most value in Bal and Dóci's (2018)

observation that WOP research to date is still predominantly focused on the individual level and has failed to take into account macro-level influences. Using a trend in Strategy research as an analogy, this macro discipline has started taking into account psychological microfoundations to explain macro phenomena (Felin, Foss, & Ployhart, 2015). WOP research may benefit from an inverse upward approach taking into account macro-influences on individual behavior, such as inequality or economic conditions (for an example, see Sirola & Pitesa, 2018). Similarly, one of the most promising avenues for future WOP research to expand is by exploring how micro psychological processes may unfold into macro effects (for an inspiring example, see Campos et al., 2017), for instance through studying emergent processes (Lang, Bliese, & De Voogt, 2018). Furthermore, stressing the need for a stronger focus on societal issues, we believe it is imperative for WOP to take part in the ongoing Responsible Research in Business and Management movement, which for instance advocates for research to seek to contribute to the UN Sustainable Development Goals (cRRBM, 2017). EAWOP is one of the institutional endorsers of RRBM to collaborate with other disciplines in jointly reshaping our field in a sustainable and responsible way.

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Table 1

*Overview Descriptive Data and Chi Square Results*

		Overall			U.S.			Europe		
		2006 - 2007	2016 - 2017	$\chi^2$	2006 - 2007	2016 - 2017	$\chi^2$	2006 - 2007	2016 - 2017	$\chi^2$
Focus on performance	Freq.	229	228	1.69	177	137	.56	52	91	.16
	%	63.6	59.2		69.1	66.5		50.0	50.8	
Focus on well-being	Freq.	89	103	--	52	43	--	37	60	--
	%	24.7	26.8		20.3	20.9		35.6	33.5	
Focus on both performance & well-being	Freq.	42	54	--	27	26	--	15	28	--
	%	11.7	14.0		10.5	12.6		14.4	15.6	
Individual-level studies	Freq.	322	337	.67	227	176	1.07	95	161	.15
	%	89.4	87.5		88.7	85.4		91.3	89.9	
Focus on individual explanation	Freq.	116	77	27.97**	85	43	18.91**	31	34	5.11
	%	32.2	20.0		33.2	20.9		29.8	19.0	
Focus on situational explanation	Freq.	96	76	--	77	46	--	19	30	--
	%	26.7	19.7		30.1	22.3		18.3	16.8	
Focus on both individual and situational explanation	Freq.	148	232	--	94	117	--	54	115	--
	%	41.1	60.3		36.7	56.8		51.9	64.2	
Intervention studies	Freq.	46	74	5.72*	37	47	5.37*	9	27	2.45
	%	12.8	19.2		14.5	22.8		8.7	15.1	

*Notes.* The Chi-square test measures the dependency of nominal variables. For the Chi-square analyses for Overall  $N = 745$ ; for U.S.  $N = 462$ ; and for Europe  $N = 283$ . \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .