

Why Romanian I/O psychologists are out of options. A critique to our maladapted formative system

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Psychologists working in Romania in the area of work, industrial and organizational psychology are seriously underpaid and struggle both personally and professionally with an incredible lack of options. This has been made sadly clear by the study run by the Romanian Association of Work and Industrial Psychology less than a year back (APIO, 2013). The study shows that most I/O psychologists struggle in low-pay jobs, doing menial activities without strategic outlook or impact, and having little or no prospects of growing to anywhere else. At the same time, various other professions earn good money doing professional activities to which psychologists should by any rights have a first call.

It is our duty to explore this situation and its causes, in order to turn the tides in our favor. Why does this happen? Why are I/O psychologists so severely underpaid in Romania? I dare to say that psychologists working in other areas are faced with similarly bleak prospects, for example those active in educational or clinical psychology, but we do not have hard data to show this. And then, even if it would be so: this is not a motive for I/O psychologists to be bogged down, too. After all, we should be the most entrepreneurial thinking, the most prepared to face the market, the most ready to make a business (like, say, our own?) grow and flourish. We are, of course, the closest to the business environment.

This short editorial offers a possible explanation to the current state of affairs. It is a critique to the current state of education in I/O psychology in Romania. We are of the opinion that the state of practice reflects the state of education, and that psychologists educated in a certain spirit are rarely able (as we certainly see) to shed their shackles and run against that spirit. Specifically, we see two main problems with education in I/O psychology in Romania.

First, education in this area is heavily marked by educators who are not practitioners, and who have rarely, if ever, seen a real business up close. The best some of them can say is that they consulted some local entrepreneur with a 10 employees headcount, and even then they probably run some tests on prospective employees, using outdated tests for whatever obsolete constructs were tested 50 years ago - like distributive attention, accented personalities or whatnot. Of course, how can such an educator show a student what real consulting skills are about? No opportunities and no perspectives for the educator reflects in the same lack for the student, of course.

Second, the topics which are taught in I/O psychology in Romania are sometimes - oftentimes - either seriously outdated or seriously unimportant for real practice. We see topics which are taught now, and which may have been hot between 20 and 30 years back, oftentimes focusing on "facts" which may have been considered true in the 70s, but have been either developed or utterly disproven by science since. We also do not see any of the hot topics in today's I/O psychology being taught to students. As an effect, our students, who are after all our future colleague I/O psychologists, are not adapted to the needs of their prospective clients. They know how to administer a bunch of outdated tests (usually infringing on copyrights even with those), and do not make sense of higher-order needs of their clients. If we would take the average I/O psychologist today and read out a list of hot topics in our realm, as shown by current published research or by conference presentations, it is quite possible that they would not recognize more than a quarter of those constructs or phenomena.

We think that this is a serious matter and that the least we can do is show what is

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important today, in client needs and academic research. And trust to both educators and students that they will have the spirit to follow the way to competence and self-improvement, once it is shown.

We will for starters focus on the client's needs. Of course, academic education will need to cover all the bases and give students a general education on topics in I/O psychology. However, it is clear that future practitioners will not be prepared to face the labor market if they are not able to meet client needs, and teaching what is important to clients has to start from knowing what is important to clients.

The APIO study (APIO, 2013) shows that more than half of what I/O psychologists to today is focused around some form of other of assessment. Selection relies heavily on assessment, but so does development: good practice is to assess before, and maybe even after one implements training or coaching initiatives. Well, what are the needs of clients when we look at assessment? SHL's "2013 Global Assessment Trends Report" (GATR; Fallaw & Kantrowitz, 2013) gives a very accurate and up-to-date picture to this question. The GATR is based on answers collected from 592 human resources professionals from companies headquartered throughout the world, and is relevant for Romania, too, because, at least in multinational companies, global trends are immediately visible and rarely lag behind more than one year.

For example, the first key finding of this interesting study (p. 8) is that companies continue to focus on engagement and leadership. The two top priorities in HR projects are "engaging the workforce" and "developing leaders". Both these two foci are valid for more than half of the interviewed HR practitioners, and this would translate to the fact that probably around half of the multinational companies active in Romania (and possibly a comparative percent of Romanian businesses) will have budgets allocated for these activities. We do not want to speculate to how much such budgets would amount, but it sure is a hell of a lot of money, comparative to what I/O psychologists in Romania usually make. But do they have the capacity to access these funds?

We are sadly sure that few I/O psychologists know enough about the theory of work engagement, and even less about the practice of assessing and developing work

engagement, in order to be credible consultants to companies who have such needs in Romania. Work engagement has become an important topic in work psychology, being related to positive individual and organizational outcomes such as performance, career progression, (lack of) voluntary turnover, (lack of) absenteeism, (lack of) workplace deviance, motivation, emotional and physical wellbeing and others. The importance of job engagement and job attitudes in general is also shown by the volume of papers presented at the 2013 Annual Conference of the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology (SIOP) which was held in Houston, Texas, between April 11-13. If one consults the electronic conference program planner

(<http://www.siop.org/programsearch/Default.aspx?conid=7>), "Job Attitudes / Engagement" pops up as the third largest topic in terms of number of presentations - that really is something in such a top conference as SIOP.

Understanding the importance of this topic, Coralia Sulea and her colleagues and the West University in Timisoara have organized in 2011 an important international workshop on Occupational Health Psychology, with a specific focus on work engagement, among others. Details can be found on their website (<http://occupationalhealthpsychology.wordpress.com/international-ohp-workshop/>), and in the Romanian Journal of Applied Psychology, which has hosted a special issue on occupational health psychology (Volume 14, Issue 1). Most important, one of the gurus on this topic, Professor Wilmar Schaufeli (Utrecht University, The Netherlands) took part in the workshop, and even came over again to visit Romania as a keynote speaker for the Romanian National Conference on Work and Organizational Psychology (APIO 2012, Timisoara, 26-28 April 2012). One would have expected the presence of such a highly esteemed figure to spark a host of research on this important topic, and to see academics, researchers and students jump this topic. Unfortunately, no such effects happened in Romania.

As to "developing leaders"... well, this is of course the largest topic in terms of accepted papers at the 2013 SIOP. Leadership has sparked a constant interest for practitioners and their clients, and academia has kept pace with it. Unfortunately, not Romanian academia - the

topics studied in the few courses offered for our I/O students on leadership are mainly theoretical. None focuses for example on established instruments for measuring leadership, or on techniques for developing leadership. "Talent management" is one of the key foci identified by the "Global Assessment Trends Report" - it shows in multinational businesses "a desire to improve talent measurement" (p. 15), with almost 75% of respondents stating that they will improve the way in which talent is measured in their organizations, focusing, it seems, on the use of objective assessments of potential for critical roles. Still no Romanian course in psychology even touches Talent Management. Students and practitioners do not even know what "talent" is: how to define, assess, identify, develop, and retain talent? What measures to use in order to define the talent pool? What a talent pipeline is? How to assess the talent pool? How traditional assessments (such as cognitive ability or personality) relate to more modern assessments, such as situational judgment tests, simulations and "serious games" etc.? This is a significant drawback, hampering our future practitioners and closing their options in their relationships with prospective clients.

Another key finding of the GATR is the emphasis business people put on linking assessment (both pre-hire and post-hire) with business outcomes. For example, it seems from the GATR that HR professionals are more inclined to connect pre-hire assessment to increases in productivity, and post-hire assessment with improved performance (p. 20). This is an important finding, because it makes an important sales point for I/O psychologists who understand econometry: the financial advantages of pre-hire assessments (e.g. screening and comprehensive assessments for selection purposes) should be presented in terms of overall business advantages, such as better overall productivity, employer branding, or budget efficiency, whereas the financial advantages of post-hire assessments (e.g. talent assessments for developmental purposes) should be presented in terms of improved performance for the focal person. However, when discussing such obvious and comparatively simple points with I/O psychologists in Romania, our personal experience has been that they do not even understand what all these words are about. No

academic program explains pre-hire and post-hire differences in assessment. And certainly none explains ways to compute the financial value of assessments. I believe that our colleague Lavinia Țânculescu has made a major move in this important direction, with her celebrated workshop on HR econometry held at the 2012 APIO conference in Timișoara and at the 2013 APIO conference in Brașov. It's a beginning, one which we would like to see reproduced by academic programs, but which as yet has not been given the attention it really deserves. While not much research can be done on this - as shown by the SIOP conference, where few presentations were held on this topic (Strategic HR/Utility) - we personally find this topic to be of tremendous importance for a practitioner, outlining the difference between mere technicians and consultants who can be partners who add business value to their clients.

As a conclusion, we have identified three important topics, outlined both by surveys of important business (i.e. prospective clients) and, at least in part, by the interest of the top academic community, as critical, hot and the new frontier in I/O research and practice. For some of them we have had a few visionary people in Romania showing the way. But Academia has not yet formally embraced those topics. This is a pattern, sadly for Romanian formal academic and informal practical programs, which reflects on the quality of their output: undereducated psychologists, without options on the labor market, which, instead of developing as high flyers, will struggle in the bogs for a lifetime. We've seen it happening. We still see it happening. Hopefully we won't see it happening anymore in the future.

We should also propose solutions to this troublesome situation, but, frankly, these are difficult to advance. I have to acknowledge that in the beginning I have had high hopes from what they now call "parallel education", or "practitioner education". This means, in essence, that psychologists who finish the minimum requirement academic education in Romania (that's a BA, based on 3 years of study in the Bologna model), and are sick and tired of the fact that formal academic programs do not teach them anything about practice, will not follow such formal academic programs anymore. Instead, they enlist in programs which are oftentimes presented as "alternative master programs" or simply "formative programs". We

should not delude ourselves, however: we see in these programs the same outdated, uninformed, underachieving, under-professionalized psychologists posing as teachers, as we see in general in our profession. And, really, these "alternative" programs dubbed as "master programs" are neither alternative nor master programs. Not "alternative", because they are exactly as non-formative and underachieving as the formal programs they want to dissociate from. And not "master", because a master's diploma is a formal academic degree, certified by a state authority (the Ministry of Education). Certainly, I can say, these "alternative" programs are not part of the solution but part of the problem.

I would therefore not look towards programs, formal or informal, but towards people. As the Romanian proverb goes, "places are made holy by people" and not the other way around. I feel that students and young psychologists are thoroughly misled by people - professors or trainers - who are underachievers themselves. I for myself would be troubled to have as teacher or supervisor an older psychologist who after 30 or 40 years of

practice still work for a minimum salary, doing menial work for minor clients. This is certainly not a sign of achievement. And what will such a supervisor teach a young professional? Well, of course, how to work for a minimum salary, doing menial work for minor clients - because the supervisor himself has no other horizon. But we have in Romania beautiful examples of young professionals, achievers who have proven themselves locally and internationally. These examples of success should be celebrated: these are the people a new generation should learn from. My young(er) colleagues: pick your models wisely. Because they will set the stage for your Flourishing or Withering.

References

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