

# Thoughts on work

Angela Mansi looks at current thinking in occupational psychology

Stress and well-being at work and management development were the two main strands of research discussed at this year's British Psychological Society Occupational Psychology Annual Conference.

## Much stress on stress

There was a general consensus that stress at work has been rather over-analysed, even though it is highly topical and much of the research presented was seen to be relevant and applicable. There are now so many theories about stress, its causes and management that it must be quite confusing for anyone in HRM to decide how to remedy the problem and how to choose and implement a stress programme.

Emotional intelligence was thought to be one way to cope. The other was the suggestion that if we

learn to accept our emotions, we will not be so stressed by them. I have to say that this seemed rather circular to me, and reminiscent of my great-grandmother's maxim "if you don't like it, change it, and if you can't change it, accept it".

So, while stress is still an ongoing and topical issue in the workplace, no discernible outstanding research or innovative practice in stress management was presented at the conference this year.

What was more stimulating for me were the presentations and seminars on management styles.

The dominant theme of management research focused on the diversity of management. Two particularly interesting papers were *Leadership: a Masculine Past, but a Feminine Future?* presented by Dr Beverley Alimo-Metcalfe, of University of Leeds, and *It Don't Matter if You're Black or White? Not According to 360-degree Feedback* presented, interestingly, by Dr Alimo-Metcalfe's daughter, Juliette Alban-Metcalfe.

## Influence of more female chiefs

Usually studies on management styles have come from USA, where CEOs and top managers are seen to fit a particular profile of white, middle class, middle-aged males with characteristics that include ambition, focus, high energy levels, decisiveness, charm and tolerance to stress. Until the early 1990s, there was no noticeable difference between men's and women's styles of management, although it was argued that there were really too few women at the top to form a profile.

In 1998, 3.6% of top directors were women. In 2001, this figure had risen to 9.9%, which Dr Alimo-Metcalfe argued was beginning to influence the workplace and style of management. Senge states that "women are the greatest undevel-

oped natural resource in the world today" and that we need to reshape our thinking when it comes to choosing top managers, rather than sticking with the old but maybe outdated formula mentioned above.

A new questionnaire was developed by Rosner (1990) called the Multi Factor Leadership Questionnaire (Rosner, 1990, *Harvard Business Review*) which measured women's management styles. It showed that women displayed more transformational management style than men, and were seen, generally, to have a significantly greater impact on individual motivation, satisfaction, performance, team effects, financial performance and effectiveness in the public sector.

The qualities from 360-degree feedback (of 3,500 responses here) viewed women as having three main areas of strength — in leading individuals, their personal qualities and in organisational skills.

Where they were leaders of individuals, they showed qualities of valuing individuals, empathy, enabling, developing others, encouraging change and being accessible. Their personal qualities included openness, honesty, integrity, decisiveness, admitting mistakes, being inspiring and having complex problem-solving skills. The last is particularly interesting as women are seen as more divergent thinkers — ie they can do more than two things at once. In terms of organisational skills they showed good networking skills, focused effort and the ability to build shared vision internally and with external bodies, develop culture and facilitate change as well as being participative and inclusive in their management style.

A major argument which calls for further management research is that women are finally breaking through the glass ceiling, not in

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numbers that are highly noticeable, but enough for them to make a difference in terms of how the organisation is run.

## Bleak for black managers

The second paper highlighted possible racial discrimination that can show itself through appraisals and feedback. Despite the increasing importance of valuing diversity in the workplace, this is seen as an under-researched area.

Briefly, there is significant evidence to show that black managers are rated lower in performance than white managers, especially when the raters themselves are white. More surprising is that both black and white raters gave white managers higher ratings. A study in the UK civil service found that white staff received higher evaluation than all the minority ethnic staff, in all age groups.

The authors concluded it was a bleak outlook in terms of management development. They asked why, if we are so concerned with widening participation, are we not actually applying the principles to the workplace, particularly when it comes to management.

Clearly, an area for much future research and a topic I expect will be expanded upon at next year's BPS conference.

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## Work psychology: keeping up to date

The BPS Annual Conference is the only national forum for occupational psychologists to meet, under the umbrella of their governing body, the British Psychological Society.

Delegates came from all areas of work psychology — academia, consultancy and research — and included chartered psychologists, PhD graduates and MSc students, professors and government psychologists.

There were more than 200 occupational psychologists from large public and private sector organisations such as the Home Office, Department of Trade and Industry, Department for Work and Pensions, Police Service, NHS, RAF, Deloitte & Touche, Prison Service, Henley Management College and most British universities and business schools.

What all have in common is an interest in what is new in research and practice, in the field of work psychology, and how they can take that back into the workplace and their teaching.